A LIVID LADY'S GUIDE to GETTING EVEN
How I Crushed My Homeland with My Mighty Grimoires
3
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A Livid Lady's Guide to Getting Even: How I Crushed My Homeland with My Mighty Grimoires Volume 3 [Complete]

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Prologue

I'd taken up residence in the noble district of one of the most prosperous cities in the world: the capital of the Yutear Empire. This great power stretched over half of the Central Continent. On one end of the noble district were the estates of the most powerful nobles of the robe and feudal lords. My mansion stood on the other side, next to the townhouses of the lesser nobles and wealthy merchants. It originally belonged to a baron who built a grand secondary residence he could not afford to maintain to make himself look good. For all of his showy tendencies, the man had good taste, and the interior he chose was subdued and elegant rather than loud.

At that moment, I fought fiercely with an unending pile of documents in that very mansion. It had become my base of operations in the capital or the new headquarters of my firm since I'd recently changed the address of my head office in an official capacity. I heard footsteps in the corridor beside my office and lifted my gaze from the papers. Right then, the door opened, and a young girl with blonde hair so bright it looked like strands of gold and a pair of differently colored eyes poked her head in.

"Mama! Can I come in?"

"You can. But remember to ask before opening the door next time," I answered, hugging the girl who immediately rushed into my arms.

Even though she called me "mama," this sweet girl was not my biological child. After unexpectedly finding her inside a dungeon, I had adopted her.

I, Elizabeth Leiston, was born to a prestigious ducal house of a nation as powerful as the empire, the Kingdom of Haldoria. For many years, I lived as the fiancée of the crown prince, Friede Haldoria. But he cast me away and imprisoned me under false charges. My father and his, the king, knew of my predicament but

did not move a finger to help me in my time of need. The same went for the nobles of Haldoria who sided with Friede to maintain their positions and privileges and those who quickly criticized me at the first rumor. Enraged by these people, I swore to take revenge.

With the help of a nobleman from the empire, Lucas Lebrick, my loyal maid and I fled to his homeland. While I hated Haldoria so badly I wished I could act at once, the object of my vengeance was a powerful nation. It was not the kind of adversary a young woman with no money and no status could take on. Thus, I started a business to expand my influence and secure funds. I remained in the shadow and did everything possible to erode Haldoria's might, one step at a time.

Circumstances eventually forced me to head to a dungeon, where I found the young girl I later adopted—Alice. She was trapped inside a peculiar crystal that emerged from the carcass of a fire drake. I initially suspected that she must have something to do with the people who tried to attack us in the dungeon. No matter how many times I examined her, Alice appeared to be a regular child.

"Mama, are you done with work?" she asked.

"Not yet, Alice. I'll finish soon so be a good girl and wait a bit longer."

I picked her up and sat her on the sofa I used to welcome guests into my office. I glanced at Misha, my catkin attendant, who was organizing papers for me. She nodded and started preparing some tea and sweets. Misha was a slave I bought when I first arrived in the imperial capital. Although she was learning how to be a proper waiting maid, she did much more than that and was a very helpful secretary. She quickly set down honey tea and cookies in front of Alice and got back to work.

Mireille, the loyal waiting maid who followed me in my escape, and Lunoa, a core member of my firm, eventually entered. I gathered the documents I needed to give them, then looked at the sofa. Before I knew it, Alice had laid down and curled up into a ball, her eyes closed.

“She fell asleep,” I remarked quietly.

Mireille took out a blanket and handed it to me, so I held Alice up and wrapped her up in it before sitting down with her in my arms.

“I see she came running to you once again, Miss Ellie,” said Mireille.

“She sure did.”

Alice appeared to feel lonely easily and often came to my office. I still had no idea why she was so attached to me or called me “mama.” Even when I had asked, her response—“Because mama is mama!”—hadn’t been very helpful. Whenever I tried to inquire about her true parents, she tilted her head in confusion. Truth be told, the circumstances in which I discovered her were so peculiar that I wasn’t even sure she had parents.

As I watched her sleeping face, I combed through her hair with my hand. She truly looked just like a regular child.

“Miss Ellie. I have a letter for you,” whispered Mireille to avoid waking up Alice.

I freed up one hand and received the letter from Mireille.

“Oh my, it’s from Tida,” I said softly, checking the sender’s name.

Tida was a friend I’d made in the empire. While she was a sister of the Church of Ibris, the religion with the most believers on the Central Continent, she had a pleasant disposition and enjoyed drinking and gambling. All in all, she was the furthest thing from a devout clergywoman you could imagine.

“She’ll be back in the capital soon.”

As a walking sister, Tida journeyed through remote areas with no doctors or healers to cure people. It turned out she would soon return to the capital for a while.

“Shall we invite her for tea?” Mireille suggested.

She’d most definitely prefer alcohol, I thought.

I poked fun at my faraway friend as I stood up to change for a meal I had to attend tonight.

The sun had almost set by the time Misha, Mireille, and I arrived in front of the restaurant as magic lanterns lit the large street. It was quite late, so we left Alice and Lunoa at home. We’d be dining at was a renowned establishment mostly visited by nobles and rich merchants called Silver Arrow. As soon as we passed through the door, a man in a butler outfit bowed to us with practiced elegance.

“Welcome. Do you have a reservation?” he asked.

“I’m Ellie Leis. We’re here to see someone.”

“Of course. I shall lead you to your table at once.”

We followed the butler to the top floor.

“This way, please,” he said, opening a thick door and leading us into a secluded room.

It seemed soundproof, so I assumed nobles and merchants often used it to converse. The room was kept purposefully dim and tastefully decorated. A table was in the center and a man sat on one side, twirling a glass of brandy and taking in the delicate aroma.

“It has been a while, Mister Hokins.”

“Indeed. We haven’t seen each other since the council.Have we, Miss Leis?”

Darc Hokins, the Chief, had been waiting for us. He wore a fine suit tailored by the imperial family’s favorite tailor and had his hair swept back. From the outside, the member of the empire’s Merchants’ Guild Council was a financier who dealt with noblemen and merchants. The truth, however, was that he ruled over the underworld.

“Thank you very much for inviting me today,” I said, taking a step toward him. Immediately, Darc took out what appeared to be a short cane and pointed it at me. A small detonation echoed in the room as gunpowder flew, and a small iron nugget roughly the shape of a chinquapin erupted at high speed. I reflexively strengthened my body with mana and grasped the lump of iron that flew at me.

“Quite the rough welcome,” I said.

“Take it as my way to say good evening,” he answered. “I heard you took good care of Million while in Count Hammit’s territory.”

Darc and I talked like nothing was wrong, but a lot happened in the past few seconds.

Misha didn’t seem to understand what exactly was going on. All she knew was that the man sitting in front of us had attacked me, so she’d unsheathed her dagger and jumped in front of me to protect me. Mireille had moved the second Darc had reached inside his pocket. By the time he fired, she was already behind him, holding a knife to his throat.

Two more people were in the room, a man and a woman who looked very much like each other. Twins, perhaps? They were most likely Darc’s bodyguards. Considering their attire and weapons, they appeared to be from the Southern Continent. The man stuck the tip of his spear to Mireille’s neck, while the woman held a scroll with the Southern Continent’s language written on it.

“Care to lower that knife?” Darc said.

“It’ll be her pleasure. *After* your man lowers his spear, that is,” I replied.

Darc stared at his bodyguard and took away his spear. The woman also stepped back. I also gestured at Mireille to get rid of the knife.

“Misha, you step back too,” I said.

“O-Okay... Miss... What was that earlier?”

“A gun,” I responded.

“A...gun?”

“It’s a weapon that propels iron bullets by using the explosive force of gunpowder. Well, it’s no more than a powerless relic. Useless in a fight.”

“Useless?” repeated Misha, surprised. “But it seemed a lot more destructive than an arrow!”

“Oh? The little catkin lady has a good eye,” said Darc, sounding pleased. He set his gun on the table to make it easier to see. “Bullets are much faster than arrows, but they have a fatal flaw.”

“A flaw?” asked Misha.

I sat opposite Darc and let the bullet I’d caught earlier roll onto the table.

“Unlike arrows, one cannot imbue bullets with mana,” I explained.

“Powerful individuals have no trouble dodging or repelling them. Some reinforcements to their body does the trick,” said Darc.

“Besides, only eccentric alchemists deal with gunpowder,” I continued. “Maintaining a gun is quite costly. There was a time when researchers thought these weapons could allow non-magicians to carry out long-distance offensives and actively studied them. But they eventually realized they’d never come close to magic and gave up. Nowadays, only antique collectors care to purchase them.”

“Well I quite like them,” said Darc as if he deeply deplored the status quo “Anyhow, thank you for joining me, Ellie Leis.”

“It’s the least I could do after you went out of your way to invite me.”

“Shall we move on to dinner?”

We ate while making small talk. After the meal, wine was served,

and Darc finally decided it was time to get down to business. I wasn't surprised to learn he'd called me today to discuss what had happened in Hammit County with an organization under his wing. In short, he wanted me to avoid such incidents in other territories in the future.

"Am I to understand that you'd rather we dealt with these matters all at once in the capital?"

"Indeed," he responded. "I'd rather not have you cause a commotion in every new territory you visit."

Dealings like this one left no records. Darc and I would simply exchange verbal promises. I didn't necessarily mind, though. I was fairly sure that as long as I didn't go back on my word, he wouldn't either. No physical contracts left behind meant trust was important in such matters, and he knew that.

"I shall offer Traitre protection. None of the organizations under me will lay a finger on your company. I'll also do what I can to prevent them from leaking information on Traitre. Although, you most likely understand that I can't guarantee this."

"That's plenty. Thank you very much."

Afterward, Darc and I agreed on the finer details of our collaboration. By the time we left the restaurant, the darkness of the night had fully taken over the city.

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A woman approached a man sitting on a luxurious chair, then knelt and bowed her head. The woman, Scorpion, was missing her right arm. Her face was pale, as though she had yet to recover from her wound. The man allowed her to speak, and she bowed further until her forehead knocked the ground.

"I'm terribly sorry. I failed to carry out the mission you gave me. Allow me to atone with my life."

The man laughed and said, "Raise your head. You played your part well."

“But I... I could not get to the merchant and lost to that sister...” said Scorpion, clenching her teeth.

“It’s fine. You learned that someone like her was by her side. That is plenty interesting. That merchant, Ellie Leis... No, Elizabeth Leiston, might be the one I was looking for,” said the man, smiling. “Anyway, there is no need for you to beat yourself up over this. You may rest. You lost most of the monsters under your control, right?”

“I’m ashamed...”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll supply you with monsters again. Oh, and we must do something about that missing arm of yours. I’ll have a magic prosthetic limb artisan visit you.”

“Thank you for your clemency, young master,” stated Scorpion before exiting the room.

The man happily gulped down alcohol when another voice echoed in the room.

“You’re awfully nice to your subordinates.”

The elven man who spoke had entered the room through a different door from the one Scorpion had used. He was Lotton Flywok, the Clairvoyant, who belonged to the empire’s Merchants’ Guild Council.

“I always cherish my allies,” the other man asserted.

Lotton shrugged and didn’t gratify him with a response.

“Things have gotten quite interesting, haven’t they? So, who is that sister who cut off Scorpion’s arm? The one whose Divine Artifact is a scythe.”

“Tildania Nautilus,” replied Lotton. “Miss Ellie seems to have met her after escaping to the empire.”

“Tildania the Envoy, huh? That’s not just anybody.”

“More importantly, could you tell me what you were thinking

with that king poison slime?" asked Lotton, glaring at the man with a dangerous glimmer in his eyes.

"Come on, don't be mad. It didn't cause *you* any trouble, did it?"

"It certainly caused trouble for the empire, and I am one of the pillars of its economy. I cannot keep doing business with someone like you."

One of Lotton's subordinates handed him a contract to him. Lotton walked up to the man and placed it beside him.

"As stated here, I hereby void our previous dealings," Lotton said.

"My. That's a shame... Phasmid."

Lotton jumped back just in time to dodge his subordinate's blade, who tried to strike his neck with a concealed dagger. A look of astonishment took over his features. His childhood friend, the subordinate he trusted enough to carry out a secret transaction like this one, had just betrayed him and tried to take his life.

"Rick?! Wh-Why?! screamed Lotton.

His subordinate smirked and let out a mocking laugh.

"Ha ha ha!" the still-sitting man erupted in laughter. "Don't be so mean, Phasmid."

"Excuse my rudeness, young master."

Lotton watched as his subordinate's face warped beyond recognition. It soon turned into a different person's face that he did not recognize.

"Who are you?! And what did you do to Rick?!"

"Your friend is long dead," declared Phasmid.

"What?!"

“And from today onward, *I* will be Lotton Flywok.”

The man who bore Lotton’s face stood in a puddle of blood, a sinister smile on his lips. In his hand was a severed head, one with the same face as his own. He turned to look at the man enjoying another glass of wine and straightened his posture. His expression and demeanor instantly changed to match those of Lotton Flywok.

“Well then, young master, I shall bid you farewell and return to the empire.”

“Sure,” expressed the man casually, signaling he had lost interest.

Phasmid left the room. Only a few seconds had passed when another shadow appeared behind the man who carelessly swung his full glass and watched the liquid twirl. Known as Crow, her provocative clothes resembled those of a harlot, and a black veil concealed her face.

“Speaking of which,” the man said, “the stupid prince seems to have come up with yet another funny idea.”

He’d materialized a gold coin of the empire out of nowhere and played with it.

“Should I interfere?” inquired Crow.

“No, just monitor him.”

“Understood. What of the fire drake you gave Scorpion? The experiment—”

“Ignore it.”

“But that experiment—”

“I don’t care. It was a failure anyway. If they notice anything… Well, that will prove interesting in itself.”

“As you command.”

Crow bowed to the man and disappeared, seemingly melting into her shadow just as she had appeared.

“Now, now... I hope you show me a fun time, Elizabeth Leiston.”

Chapter 1: A Mother and Daughter's Day Off

Misha, Lunoa, and Alice were asleep deep into the night as Mireille and I were enjoying a glass of wine in my room.

"How refreshing," Mireille said. "This wine is truly easy to drink."

"It is," I agreed.

We'd received this bottle from Count Hammit. As the lord of a coastal territory, he'd procured it from the Western Continent.

"I can't say if it tastes so distinct from what we are used to because the grapes or the water are different, but it is delicious," I added.

Since I was in a good mood, I sipped on my wine as I started reading through the reports Mireille had just handed me. It was from the man I'd left overseeing my spies in the kingdom. Up until now, he had kept his distance from the castle to avoid arousing suspicion, making the spies conceal themselves among the people. But he'd recently secured a source of information inside the royal castle. This was all hearsay, so he could not guarantee the accuracy of this information, but it was still helpful in its own right.

In fact, we'd been able to track down a noble who'd helped Friede carry out his plan to get rid of me: Marquess Lampton, the minister of finance. Lampton was someone I trusted, and we often found ourselves greatly troubled by Friede's foolish behavior. As it turned out, I had misplaced my trust because he plotted with the prince to remove me from the picture. He'd been helping Friede maintain his position while embezzling money to line his own pockets. Ever since Roselia had arrived in the castle, he'd kept a low profile. Lampton was far from being reckless and knew when to be cautious.

Once I finished this report, I moved on to the periodic

correspondence I received from my allies posted in Haldoria's vassal countries.

"Roselia is as impressive as ever," I said. "I sowed seeds of discord and stirred up the anti-kingdom sentiment in Haldoria's vassal countries, but she's already normalized diplomatic relations to this extent."

"She's a troublesome opponent. by manipulating the masses, we've turned public opinion against the kingdom. However, she has control over the ruling elites. It'll be hard to push these countries to rebel under these circumstances."

"Indeed," I said. "But we may have a card to play *because* we're dealing with Roselia."

"What do you mean?".

"We shall make use of the militarist faction. Some of them are quite radical. If we can fund and arm them, the chances of a conflict breaking out with one of the vassal countries or the empire will increase. Considering her position, Roselia won't be able to do much."

"I see. You wish to create a problem large enough that she cannot handle it alone."

"Roselia is very capable and receives her authority directly from the king. That does not change the fact that she is a Fadgal. Unlike me, a former member of House Leiston and thus a royalist, she cannot ignore the friction between the factions, nor can she put a stop to the militarists' excesses."

I gathered the reports and locked them away. Then, I took a box from a shelf containing a crystal that fit inside my palm.

"Is this what you received from the alchemist this morning?" asked Mireille.

"Yes. This is a thunder spirit crystal. It shall become one of my trump cards in my fight against the kingdom."

“Do you mean...”

“Haldoria is strong. Part of its strength obviously comes from the fact that it is a large nation, but the main reason is Bulat Haldoria’s presence.”

“The great hero of the kingdom, Bulat the God of Thunder...”

“Bulat’s mastery of martial arts is quite something. What makes him truly fearsome is the might of his Divine Artifact, the God of Thunder’s sword, Glazermierch.

“If I recall correctly, it increases his physical abilities and the power of his thunder magic, allowing him to cast high-level thunder spells without incantations.”

“He also has a secret technique called Thunder Spiritification. With it, he can turn his body into lightning and move as fast as a flash of lightning. He can become thunder itself.”

Mireille gulped at Bulat’s ability to turn himself into a natural calamity. Undoubtedly, he was one of the strongest fighters alive on the continent.

“Thunder spirit crystals will be key to dealing with him,” I said. “But there is one problem.”

“What is it?”

“Thunder spirit crystals are incredibly expensive. They aren’t useful for most people, but the process of creating one is so precise that only a handful of first-class alchemists are capable of it. The raw materials needed are also very costly. After working toward making money with Traitre for so long and using aqua silk to gather talented alchemists, I finally obtained one.”

One thunder spirit crystal was far from enough, but this was still a significant step in the right direction. I placed the rare crystal into the box and put it away. Enough about the kingdom for today.

It was unbecoming, but I picked up a piece of cheese with my fingers and tossed it into my mouth. As I enjoyed the snack, my

eyes went to the door of Alice's bedroom.

"I keep letting her feel lonely," I said.

I'd seen Alice from the window of my office this afternoon. She was playing alone in the garden, which got me thinking. I wanted to give her more attention. Alice often came to my office and waited quietly by my side for me to finish work and usually fell asleep before I finished. Was she lonely?

"Even when she plays by herself, she sometimes stops and looks around for you," said Mireille.

"I took her in, so I strongly believe that I have a duty to raise her properly. But...I don't know how to behave around a child. All I ever did when I was young was train or study to become a good queen. I don't want Alice to have a childhood like mine. She calls me "mama," you know? I have to give back to her and love her like a true mother would. Still, I don't quite know what a mother's love feels like."

"After all, your mother..."

"Passed away immediately after giving birth to me," I finished for her.

I had never known my mother or felt her love. Even when father did cherish me, he always treated me as someone he had to respect —as the future queen of the kingdom. To him, I wasn't quite a daughter but a prized possession. I was a sword he tirelessly tempered until it was ready to fight for the good of the country. On paper, I knew that love was supposed to be essential in families, but I couldn't understand how it should feel.

"Mireille, do you have happy memories from your childhood?" I whispered.

She looked down at the wine swaying in her glass, her eyes slightly cloudy from the alcohol.

"I didn't have the happiest childhood either," she remarked. "But I have some memories of playing with my family."

Mireille hailed from a Haldorian noble family. Following the downfall of her house, her family had dispersed. I'd tried to locate her parents without telling her several years ago, only to discover they were both dead. Sorrow had marked Mireille's childhood, yet I was sure she used to have more meaningful relationships with her family than I did. My father was even more distant than a private tutor and was someone I only discussed politics with.

"Let me think," she said, recalling bygone days. "Before my father's business took a turn for the worse, my mother and I sometimes watched operas together. My father also took me on long rides on his horse. Then we'd stop for a picnic."

"I see..."

That sounded nice.

"Children surely need to experience such things," I continued. "I should take Alice somewhere too. What does my schedule look like?"

"Aqua silk production is well underway. We're letting the alchemists and craftsmen we poached from the kingdom develop products using it, so there is less for you to do directly. The development of the perfume targeted at beastkins is also going smoothly. We've reached the testing and safety checks phase with our expert fine-tuning the product and removing the last issues. Speaking of which, the sales of the Elumia series have beensteady so far. All things considered, you should be able to take some time off during the next two weeks."

"In that case, let us all go on a picnic soon."

"That's a good idea, miss. I'll have the chef prepare the food."

"No, don't. This is the perfect opportunity for all of us to cook together," I said.

"All of us?"

"Yes. We won't be able to make anything too complicated, but that's fine."

“Understood. I’ll adjust everyone’s schedules to make room for this.”

“Thank you.”

Mireille and I clinked our glasses together.

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We finally took some time off work and started preparing for the picnic we'd all been waiting for.

"Miss Ellie, does the sauce seem fine to you?" asked Misha, handing me a bowl.

"Let me see." I dipped a spoon in the sauce and had a taste. The mellow acidity and slight saltiness tickled my taste buds. "It tastes just right."

"Mama! I washed the vegetable!"

"You did well, Alice. Can you give them to Lunoa now?"

"Yeees! Here, Big Sister Lunoa!"

"Thank you, Alice," said Lunoa, taking the vegetables from Alice and skillfully chopping them.

Everyone had assembled in the kitchen this morning to cook together. To be fair, I'd had the cook do most of the work beforehand. We only made sandwiches and some simple dishes, although Alice seemed overjoyed.

Misha spread the sauce she'd just finished making over sliced bread and added cheese, ham, and fresh vegetables. After handing the vegetables to Lunoa, who was preparing some salad, Alice came running to me and pointed at Misha.

"Mama! I want to do that too!"

"We'll be counting on you then, Alice," I said, smiling.

I fetched a stool for her and helped her get on it. Then I showed her how to make a sandwich, and we started making several together. Misha took care of the savory ones, so we made sweet ones. We filled half of them with fruits and the other half with chocolate cream, the newest product of Traitre's teahouse.

“I made another one!” exclaimed Alice, showing me the sandwich she’d just made.

“You made it so well,” I answered, wiping away the chocolate cream from her cheek.

After making a lot more, we packed them inside a basket. The salad and roasted chicken were done, so we swiftly put the kitchen in order. We stored all the dishes in baskets and carried them to the entrance, where we found Mireille waiting with a carriage ready. Mireille had chosen a sturdy, regular-looking rather than the fancier one we used to conduct business. She'd already brought everything we would need, such as a picnic blanket.

"Miss Ellie, the carriage is ready," stated Mireille.

"We are finished with the food too. Let's rest for a few moments before we leave."

As planned, we set out shortly.

Misha drove the carriage and headed for Lake Kalashira, a large lake. It was relatively close to the capital, located only one hour away, and was on the path knights patrolled during their training drills. As such, monsters and brigands seldom came anywhere near it. People from the capital and beginner adventurers mostly visited it to gather herbs, but the scenery was beautiful and sometimes attracted people such as ourselves looking for a nice spot to picnic.

Alice looked outside for roughly twenty minutes, her eyes sparkling as she took in the landscape, before resting her head on my lap and nodding off.

"She fell asleep," I remarked.

"She was so excited at the prospect of this outing that she spent the entire day yesterday running around yesterday and must be tired. The scenery is quite monotone for this part of the journey, so we should let her sleep until we get closer to the lake," Mireille said.

"You're right," I answered, wrapping my fingers through her golden hair.

I realized I hadn't spent such a peaceful day in so long. The carriage went over a hill and a small forest came into sight.

“Once we pass the forest, we’ll reach Lake Kalashira,” added Mireille.

“Indeed,” I said. “Alice. Wake up, Alice. We’re almost at the lake.”

I gently shook her shoulder, then considered letting her sleep some more if that didn’t wake her up. But Alice sat up just as I debated it.

“The wake!” she exclaimed.

Alice was still half asleep and couldn’t articulate well, but she was up. She stuck her head out the window to look at the scenery of light shining through the gaps between the trees. Eventually, there were fewer and fewer trees until we saw the lake.

After we arrived nearby, we stopped the carriage by a tree, spread the picnic blanket next to the shore, brought out the baskets.

While Misha gave water to the horses, I warned Alice, “It’s dangerous, so you can’t wander alone while we’re here, understood, Alice? When you’re near the lake, always stay next to me or Mireille, all right?”

“Yes, Mama!”

The little girl was so excited to be here that she jumped around. I would need to keep a close eye on her. I left Mireille in charge of setting up the picnic and took Alice’s hand. We went for a stroll around the lake alongside Lunoa and Misha.

Alice found everything curious and wonderful, her eyes glimmering as she looked around and unable to let her eyes settle on any one thing. She went on all fours to look at the flowers, picked up acorns, and gasped before hiding behind me when she saw a man reel a fish out of the water. Had I not held her hand most of the time, she would have disappeared behind some bushes despite my warning.

“Mama, what are these misters doing?” asked Alice, pointing at

several small boats floating on the water.

“They’re fishermen,” I answered. “They catch fish using nets.”

Seawater fish were difficult to find in the capital, making this lake a popular fishing spot. Alice waved at the boats, and several fishermen waved back.

“Miss Alice, look, moonberries!” Misha said, showing her wild berries.

“Moonberries?” repeated Alice, accepting one from Misha’s hand.

“They’re bittersweet berries,” Lunoa said as Alice studied the little berry from every angle.

I created some water with my magic and washed the fruit for her. Alice then timidly brought it to her mouth.

“Sho good!” she exclaimed as she ate the moonberry.

I let out a little laugh. Perhaps Alice hadn’t noticed, but the jam she loved so much and had with every snack recently was, in fact, moonberry jam. Alice happily picked more berries from the bush before we made our way back to Mireille.

As we walked alongside the shore, Alice pointed at the forest and shouted, “Look, Mama! A bunny!”

“My, that’s true.”

I’d tensed up, assuming it might be a horned rabbit; t was no monster, just a regular hare. While I pondered bringing it down with a knife and having it for lunch, Alice was waving at it with a big smile, so I hid the knife away in a hurry.

“Miss Ellie?” asked Misha, looking at me with a suspicious air.

“It’s nothing! Never mind,” I replied, waving my hand.

As a child, I’d immediately calculate how much money a hare’s

pelt and meat could fetch at the market or analyze its usefulness to the ecosystem it lived in. Now that I thought back on it, it was the least childlike reaction one could have.

Alice waved at the hare until it ran back to the forest. After it did, I led her back to the carriage. Mireille had boiled some water and was heating our lunch. I used magic to wash Alice's hands and remove the cold dishes from the baskets. We arranged the sandwiches, salad, rolled eggs, and herb-roasted chicken on the blanket.

Lunoa swallowed a cherry tomato from her salad whole before saying, "I never would have thought there was such a beautiful place so close to the capital."

"I didn't know either," I responded. "Elsa told me about this lake."

I'd run into her by chance while trying to find a good picnic spot, and she'd suggested the idea and explained how to get there.

"Apparently, beginner adventurers often come here looking for herbs," I explained.

"It's close to the capital, and there are barely any monsters around. It seems like the perfect place for those starting out."

"Indeed. From what I heard, higher-ranking adventurers are forbidden from accepting requests that need to be carried out here. The Adventurers' Guild wants to give newcomers a place to accumulate experience without danger. Merchants can come to fetch the herbs themselves if they wish to, so this isn't the kind of request that pays enough for high-ranked adventurers to be interested in the first place."

As I talked, I wiped the corner of Alice's mouth with a handkerchief. She had crammed so much food into her mouth that she looked like a little squirrel. I picked up a sandwich that was a little crooked, which I assumed was one Alice had made. She noticed and looked at me intently, but I pretended not to realize and took a bite. The taste of fruit paste and spicy sauce clashed in

my mouth.

“Mama, is it yummy?”

“Yes, delicious.”

Alice giggled, and I smiled at her before taking another bite.

◆

A woman held a document with one hand and shoved a sandwich into her mouth with the other. The sandwiches made by the castle’s cooks were so well-made that they remained orders of magnitude better than those one could buy in town after several hours passed, and the lettuce started to soften. However, she wasted no time in chewing properly and letting their flavor seep into her taste buds. She felt the cheap sandwiches she used to eat downtown tasted much better than the fancy ones she now had to force down at her desk.

She sighed and said, “My life would be so much easier if that incapable prince could at least act in a manner that befit his position...”

Roselia Fadgal, the young lady in a sumptuous red dress and special aide to the crown prince, swiftly went through the ever-growing pile of papers covering her desk.

“Thank you for your work, Lady Fadgal. I’m terribly sorry, but I bring you more documents to review.”

“Understood. Stack them over there, please.”

“Of course.”

As the office received another mountain of papers, a woman working at a desk next to Roselia spoke up.

“Lady Roselia, let us have a short break. I shall pour you some tea.”

“My!” Roselia exclaimed, checking the clock. “It’s already this

late?”

Thus, Roselia put her pen down. Three hours had already passed since she’d had her sandwiches. Her two assistants, a man and a woman, frantically cleared out a corner where they could set down their cups of tea. She’d met the taciturn Steil and talkative Lisbeth during her school days. While the two were far from being geniuses like Elizabeth, they were an engaged couple that was capable and could accomplish most tasks in a timely manner.

“These mountains of documents never seem to go away, do they?” mused Lisbeth.

“I’m impressed His Highness managed to handle that until now,” said Steil.

“You idiot. He couldn’t handle it. That’s why Lady Roselia and the two of us are here. Lady Elizabeth obviously did it all for him.”

“Indeed, we’re Elizabeth’s replacements now that she got away,” replied Roselia, sighing.

“And how rude that is! You were also one of the candidates to become His Highness’s fiancée! Yet the royal family seems to have no qualms working you to the bone, even after refusing you! Shouldn’t we get rid of that insufferable pink-haired shorty so we can make *you* queen?”

“Don’t even joke about something so sickening.”

In her youth, Roselia used to believe that she deserved to be the next queen. She took every opportunity to challenge and compete with Elizabeth. All this fighting was in vain, and Friede’s fiancée did not change until the three of them reached adulthood. At this point, she was dismissed as the spare.

“At first,” continued Roselia, “I struggled to forget the humiliation and get over my sense of inferiority. But now, I’m beyond thankful I wasn’t chosen to be his fiancée.”

“Well, I suppose His Highness is a difficult man to live for once you know how he truly is,” Lisbeth said. “I used to admire him from

afar when I was younger, but I sure wish I could forget that time."

"When he first called me back to the capital, I think His Majesty intended to push Sylvia aside and have me marry His Highness," said Roselia. "But as soon as it seemed like he would bring it up, I let my bloodlust seep out. It stopped him right there."

"The royal family set up your current match. They couldn't force you to break things off. It'd be too much."

"Indeed. It would have been a different story if you had wanted to marry the prince, but the king can't just make you do what he wants. Unlike Lady Elizabeth's family, House Fadgal is not part of the royalists."

"He knows the Fadgal will retaliate if he pushes too far."

Roselia's assistants were brazenly bad-mouthing the royal family in the middle of the royal castle, yet she did not stop them. While she'd been able to avoid becoming Friede's fiancée, the king had still forced the role of "special aide to the crown prince" upon her. It was a made-up charge the king had effectively created to clean up after Friede all day. Still, she received more money than any other court lady in history and the authority to match. So, she could easily protect her two friends should harm come their way for their words.

"Excuse me!"

The man who'd just barged into the room with a panicked look was an official working for the prince. He had lost all manners of composure, to which Roselia and her assistants assumed Friede or Sylvia had once again gone out of their way to create more problems. They sighed without trying to conceal their displeasure.

"So, what has His Highness done?" Roselia asked. "Or was it his fiancée this time?"

"N-No... This isn't about them... The issue concerns the military circles..."

"Ah." effused Roselia, wearily bringing her hands up to hold her

forehead and looking up. *There's also them to worry about.*

She might have felt better had a beautiful night sky with stars gleaming like gems greeted her. But all she could see was the dull ceiling, which she'd grown beyond wary of looking at.

House Fadgal stood at the very top of the militarist faction. Now that Roselia, a member of that family, had been appointed to a key position in the royal castle, the noblemen of the faction had become increasingly active.

"What about them?" Lisbeth asked in Roselia's stead.

"They're pushing for the kingdom to take up arms and crush the vassal nations where the opposition is the strongest to send a message to the rest."

"Do they know how hard I've been working to restore peaceful relationships with our vassals?" Roselia deplored.

She did not mind those who called for reinforcement of the military to strengthen the nation's defenses or to subjugate monsters. But she couldn't turn a blind eye when the radicals threatened to start a war with the empire or tried to force the kingdom's vassal states into submission through military action.

"The issue is that...His Highness publicly endorsed their positions, so..."

"I can't believe that fool!" shouted Lisbeth. "He just cannot miss an opportunity to mess up, can he?!"

Steil tried to soothe his furious fiancée as he read through the document the official had just brought. "The radicals appear to have received funding and supplies from an unknown source."

"I assume His Highness's sudden support must have to do with that money."

"It was the same with the letters of introduction," Roselia noted. "As a member of the royal family, he already receives a hefty stipend, so why does he need so much money? Anyhow, we must

keep the radicals in check. Liz, please contact my father right away. Steil, I want you to find out who is funding them. Use the shadows His Majesty put at my disposal if you must."

"Yes, Lady Roselia!" the two exclaimed in unison.

They bowed and exited the room with the civil official. Once she was alone, Roselia sighed deeply. She'd lost track of how many such sighs escaped her today.

"I'm starting to see my limits," whispered Roselia. "If I'm to handle more, I shall need more authority."

As an individual, Roselia had a commanding manner and did not lack charisma. Many would drop to their knees and bow if she just said the word. However, the personal authority she derived from her position and influence was limited. Her current position had allowed the militarist faction to gain power. Roselia constantly had to mind the balance of power between her family and the royal family, often forcing herself to shelve policies she wanted to implement.

"At times like this, I should rely on the prince's authority instead, but..."

Friede had committed blunder after blunder, and most ministers had long given up on him. She could not count on him to sway anyone. The only ones who remained by his side were treacherous parasites who just wanted to line their pockets.

"Couldn't I just stumble upon a charming, capable, and influential individual?"

No one else was there to hear the lamentations overflowing from Roselia's lips.

Around the same time Roselia was drowning in work and worries, two people sat by side in the gazebo in the royals' private courtyard. The young girl with pink hair wore a lavish frilly dress and complained to the blond man next to her talk. She sounded

annoyed.

The pair were Friede Haldoria, the crown prince of the kingdom, and his fiancée, Sylvia Lockit.

“And then, the teacher mocked me!”

“You must have felt awful, Sylvie... Don’t worry, I’ll fire him for you.”

“Really?!”

“Of course. Leave it to me.”

“Thank you so much, my prince!” Sylvia beamed, clinging to Friede’s arm.

The corners of Friede’s mouth curled up into a smile when he felt her soft figure against his arm. He kissed her forehead, then finished his cup of tea.

“Well, Sylvie, I must return to my office.”

“How busy you are, my prince.”

“I’m this country’s next king,” he said, standing up. “There are countless matters that only I can handle. I’d have more time to myself if those useless officials and that impertinant Roselia were more useful.”

He shrugged and left the courtyard. Sylvia watched over him with a bright smile. As soon as he disappeared, her smile faded as she sighed.

“Aah... Why did things turn out this way? I just wanted to become queen and live in luxury.”

Sylvia was born an orphan and raised by her mother. She stood at the very bottom, and not a day passed without her despairing about her situation. Even though her mother used to work at a nobleman’s mansion—or so she’d heard—they lived in a run-down

district close to the slums. Her mother sold her company to the men who visited the tavern and spent most of the money she earned on alcohol. When Sylvia thought of her future, she could vaguely picture herself following the same path: selling her body for small change until she died a pitiful death. But her life took a surprising turn when her mother passed away. She had no idea what had taken her. It could have been the alcohol or some venereal disease for all she knew. Yet, she'd gotten terribly sick and died shortly after.

She sighed. With her mother gone, the shabby room somehow felt larger than usual.

"I'm going to have to earn my keep myself now, aren't I?"

Until now, Sylvia only performed odd jobs or waited tables at the tavern. The meager pay she received wasn't enough for her to support herself, though. She looked for the small box her mother kept hidden and opened it. There was one gold coin and a couple of silver coins, while the rest were all copper coins. It was everything Sylvia owned.

"Three months, give or take, huh?"

She wouldn't have any other choice but to sell her body, just like her mother had. She went out to seek the mistress of the tavern so she could set her up with clients as she had her mother. When she arrived, the mistress talked with a man who appeared entirely out of place. Sylvia could tell from his fine clothes that he shouldn't be in the part of town.

"That's her," Sylvia heard the mistress say as she pointed at her.

Before walking up to her, the man answered something she didn't catch.

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Lady Sylvia," he said.

"Huh?"

Sylvia learned this man worked as a butler for a nobleman—the same one whose mansion her mother used to work at as a maid.

According to the butler, Sylvia was the noble's daughter, and he'd come to fetch her and take her home.

"My master is a married man so your mother gracefully left," said the butler.

She was convinced her mother would never do something so selfless, and she doubted the man's words. If she refused, everything that awaited her would be to become like her mother. So, she made up her mind and followed him. He led her to a mansion that dwarfed any building she had ever seen.

"It's so big..."

Looking back, it was just the house of a lesser noble—nothing impressive. It wasn't even in the noble district. There were hundreds of mansions far more grand and beautiful. But to the young girl who'd known nothing other than poverty, it all looked so impressive that she wondered if this was the royal castle the rumors sometimes mentioned.

"So you're Sylvia!"

Sylvia met her father for the very first time in that mansion. Baron Lockit was a stout man with a protruding belly and a clear tendency for obscenity. She could tell immediately from the way he smirked while looking at her.

"Hmm... Her looks aren't bad. And I suppose that air of stupidity is unavoidable. She's a lowly peasant, after all."

"She could be smarter than you think. Isn't she the daughter of a dirty harlot? She must at least know how to entice men."

"Ha ha ha! My! What are those rags she's wearing? I'm impressed she isn't afraid of going out dressed like that!"

Next to her father was her half-brother, who looked every bit like his father and who, just like him and did not bother concealing his vices. Baroness Lockit stared at her in contempt, and Sylvia's half-sister was there too. Sylvia disliked feeling like a circus freak but ignored them. Baron Lockit gave some orders to a maid,

dismissing Sylvia from the room.

“This is your room, Lady Sylvia,” the maid said. “The master left orders for you so please follow them.”

The “room” was nothing but a small space in the attic, yet it was bigger than the room Sylvia used to live in with her mother.

After being taught the bare minimum in the shortest possible time, Sylvia was sent to the academy where most noble children studied. In the brief time that preceded her admission to the school, Sylvia learned the baron had accumulated so much debt he was on the verge of bankruptcy. Sylvia had inherited her mother’s good look, and he hoped some wealthy merchant would take her in as his second—or third, for all he cared—wife. Baron Lockit never cared about her one bit. He’d simply remembered the daughter he threw away as a baby and figured he could sell her off for a pretty penny.

“In the end, nobles and commoners are the same.”

That was Sylvia’s only thought when she learned the truth. As far as she was concerned, marrying some rich geezer sounded much better than selling her body in the slums. And so Sylvia started attending the academy as the baron ordered. There, her destiny again took an unexpected turn. She met a dazzling prince...and a hateful witch who acted like she knew everything better than everyone else despite being raised like a little princess. Many things happened until that woman had been thrown away, and Sylvia became the prince’s fiancée instead.

“You did well, Sylvia! As expected of my daughter!”

“I’m proud of being your brother, Sylvia!”

“I’m sure this is all thanks to my education.”

“You’re so wonderful, sister!”

The baron’s family changed their tunes when she entered a relationship with the prince. They all tried to grow closer to Sylvia, so she used them. Sylvia curried favor with them and flattered them, all the while digging for weaknesses and proof of their

unlawful behavior. She'd made sure that she could use them to remain safe no matter what happened.

Sylvia had fought for her peace and safety, overturning her destiny. She should finally be happy! And yet, the brilliant prince she'd met at the academy had turned into a man who shied away from his duties. By now, most of the ministers mocked him behind his back. He used to think of Sylvia foremost and make time to take her out, but he was so busy keeping up with his work that he barely kept her company. While she wasn't well-learned, she was no idiot. She'd long understood that the perfect prince she thought she knew was nothing but a mirage—an image Elizabeth had crafted for him.

"I made the right choices...right?" asked Sylvia.

Sylvia had not noticed, but the seeds of worry had started blooming inside her heart.

◇

I sat on a hill almost entirely covered with flowers overlooking the lake. As such, I held down my hair so it wouldn't sway too much in the wind and looked at the center of the flower field. Alice was there, clumsily trying to make a flower crown by listening to Lunoa's instructions.

"Look, Mama!"

After several failed attempts, she'd finally made one she was pleased with and came running to me with her flower crown. She'd picked small white and blue flowers.

"It's beautiful," I said.

"I'll give it to you, Mama!" exclaimed Alice, chuckling and standing on tiptoe to place the flower crown on my head.

"Thank you, Alice."

Her cheeks were flushed slightly. She waved at me and ran back to Lunoa. I could never have imagined spending such leisurely and peaceful time when I was still the crown prince's fiancée.

“Mama,” began Alice after returning to my side. “Have you ever made a flower crown?”

“Mama hasn’t.”

“Really?”

“When Mama was your age, she was very busy studying every day,” I explained.

That was a very mild way of putting it. Besides studying, I practiced magic and swordsmanship and underwent strict training to become a worthy queen. Only after meeting Mireille did I get to act more freely and start a business of my own. From the day I was born until Friede broke off our engagement, there was not a single moment I didn’t spend working for the good of the nation and the royal family.

My expression must have soured as I thought of that because Alice looked at me with big surprised eyes and asked, “What’s wrong, Mama?”

“Nothing, don’t worry.”

“Mama, do you know how to make a flower crown?”

“No, would you teach me?”

“Yes!”

Alice pulled me by the hand, and I followed her to the center of the flower field.

Misha called for us a few hours after the sun had passed its zenith. We would go home before the wind grew too cold. I took Alice’s hand. She must have been freezing because she sneezed as we walked back to the carriage. At that moment, a small spark appeared in front of her face.

“Huh?!” Lunoa let out, surprised.

“This must be spontaneous magic discharge... But why a spark?” I wondered aloud.

“Spontaneous magic discharge?” repeated Lunoa.

“You’ve only started using magic recently, so you wouldn’t know. Children with large quantities of mana often struggle to control and contain it. Their mana sometimes leaves their body by accident.”

Alice was so tired that she started wobbling, so I picked her up. She rested her head against my shoulder and fell asleep in the blink of an eye. I held her tightly so that she wouldn’t fall.

“I see,” said Lunoa.

She seemed satisfied with my answer, but Misha had a follow-up question.

“Still, her letting out a spark is strange, isn’t it? When we checked...”

“We discovered that her attribute was water,” I finished for her.

After I brought Alice to the capital, I had a doctor look at her. At the same time, I’d also checked her mana. She should have shared my affinity for water spells.

“Spontaneous magic discharge for a water-attribute user usually means a few drops. It’s a very safe attribute even for children with large quantities of mana, so I didn’t put a magic item to restrain her mana on her. Since fire is a lot more dangerous because of the sparks, most parents give their children magic items.”

“The test may have failed.”

“That’s possible. I’ll need to look into this when we get home.”

We hurried to the carriage where Mireille was waiting for us.

◇

I furrowed my brows as I pondered the results of Alice's second attribute test.

After we arrived home, I'd let Alice rest for a while before making her retake the test. This time, the results indicated her affinity for water and fire attributes. Mireille's expression grew serious, as did mine. Lunoa and Misha exchanged a puzzled look, not understanding our reaction.

Following that, Misha timidly raised her hand, "Umm... Is having an affinity for two attributes that strange?"

"It's not unheard of," I said.

"We call that having a composite attribute," Mireille added.

"What does that entail?" asked Lunoa, tilting her head in confusion.

"Lunoa, Misha, do you know who Sistia Prior is?"

"The Rank A adventurer, Mud Sistia? I do," Lunoa said.

"Last time, the two of us went to see a play recounting her adventures," Misha added.

"I am talking about her," I confirmed. "The mud attribute she uses is a composite of water and earth attributes."

"Does that mean Sistia has an affinity for both of these attributes?"

"Indeed. But in most cases, people with an affinity for several attributes can only use the resulting composite attribute, not the two separately. In Sistia's case, she can use mud attribute spells but cannot use water or earth spells. And Alice shouldn't be able to either."

"So no one's ever been able to cast spells of two separate attributes?" asked Lunoa.

I folded my arms and frowned.

“Well...” I started. “Some records to that effect remain. For instance, the Church of Ibris’s sacred scriptures depict the Black Saint using light and dark attribute spells. And Haurn Paracelsus, the elves’ famous alchemist and great sage during the days of the old kingdom, was said to have had control over three attributes: water, wind, and earth.”

Lunoa paused awkwardly before saying, “But...these two are characters from old tales. We don’t even know for sure whether they truly existed, right?”

“Then to bring up an individual who we know for sure existed... Hiroshi Saitou, the hero from another world who defeated the demon king a thousand and eight hundred years ago, could use spells from every attribute.”

“Either way, Alice is an extraordinary little girl.”

“Indeed,” I agreed. “We should be careful not to let this information slip. Unsavory characters may target her. And we will need to teach how to control her mana as soon as possible.”

“Many of the children of eminent nobles and mages can use magic at this age. We’ll teach her magic and instruct her only to use one attribute in front of people,” added Mireille.

“Yes, that would be wise. Lunoa, Misha, don’t speak a word of this to anyone else,” I ordered.

“We won’t!”

“Understood!”

Now that I’d assured myself of their silence, I picked up a pen and started planning Alice’s magic lessons.

◆

Adel gazed at the great deep, enjoying the pleasing sensation of the sea breeze caressing her hair. She rented a large merchant ship

and was sailing straight toward her destination.

“Hey girly— Um, I’m sorry, Lady Adel. The wind’s getting cold so ya should... I mean, you should head back to your cabin.”

At the sight of Nguyen struggling to pick his words, Adel could hardly hold back her laughter.

“Ha ha!” she finally let out. “No need to be so stiff, Captain Nguyen. I’m the one who hid my identity.”

“Y-Yes, but, Adel... No, Lady Adel, you’re from the imperial family, aren’t you?”

“I’m more of a distant relative, really. My mother is the emperor’s cousin. Besides, I’ve got foreign blood in my veins so I have no right to enter the line of succession. I’ll leave the palace sooner or later.”

Once Adel reassured him that he could just address her as always, Nguyen relaxed.

“I’m still shocked, you know?” he said. “When the palace people called me, I never thought they’d ask me to transport *you*, girly.”

“Sorry for scaring you,” Adel said. “This trip came up out of the blue, so I didn’t have a ship to use. There aren’t that many ships ready to sail across the ocean to another continent at a moment’s notice.”

“I guess I was paid more than enough so it’s fine.”

Nguyen had gone to bring Adel back inside but hadn’t come back so Maoran came out on the deck.

“Mistress Adel, Captain Nguyen, please come in—” she said, approaching them.

The lookout suddenly rang the bell from the crow’s nest, interrupting her.

“Monster!” he screamed. “Sea drake at three o’clock!”

Amid the noise, the sailors ran onto the deck. They looked to the right and sure enough, a gigantic snake was there in between the waves. The monster, a subspecies of dragons, was a sea drake. While they were considered intermediate-class monsters, like fire drakes, the fact they lived in the water made them far more challenging to handle.

“Damn! Why’s a sea drake showing up now?!” bellowed Nguyen, clenching his jaw.

He quickly composed himself and started giving out orders. The sea drake seemed to consider their ship as prey and went straight at them.

“Grab yer guns! Mages, get ready to defend us! Use wind arts to speed up the ship!”

After roaring his orders, Nguyen called one of his sailors. He was young but quite promising, and the captain had taken a liking to him.

“You! Take the girly and Maoran with you and escape on a small boat!”

“Huh?! B-But, Captain—”

“Shut it! I haven’t got time to argue!” Nguyen screamed, seeing him hesitate. “We’ll buy you time so you’d better get them out of here!”

Adel stepped in. “Now, now, Captain Nguyen, let’s calm down. Leave this to me.”

“What?! Are you crazy?”

“Don’t worry, it’s all good! I’ll be back in a bit, Maoran.”

“You’ll go even if I try to stop you, won’t you?” inquired Maoran.

“Sure will! I don’t want the captain and the others to die for no reason.”

“All right, I’ll pray for your good fortune.”

“W-Wait!” exclaimed Nguyen, trying to stop Adel.

She ignored him and jumped off the ship.

“Hey!!!”

Before she fell into the ocean, Adel condensed her mana.

“Divine Artifact, Fēnghuá.”

Mana swirled around her, slowly taking shape. It became a beautiful hanfu jacket, modeled after vibrant flowers and elusive winds.

“Air Steps,” she said.

Wind gathered under the soles of her feet, allowing her to leap. Adel reinforced her body with mana and propelled her body forward with a gust of wind as she kicked off the air. She repeated

those movements a couple of times, then reached the sea drake in the blink of an eye. It seemed to have noticed the bountiful mana escaping from Adel's body, and it raised its head to look at her. The next moment, the blast of the monster's Water Breath, far more powerful than any human could have unleashed, flew her way.

Adel raised her right arm toward the sky, keeping her fingers together. Her jacket fluttered as she cut through the air with her hand as though it were a blade.

"Fēnghuá: Whirlwind."

A blade of wind followed her motion and cut through the Water Breath, slashing at the monster and leaving a deep wound despite its scales.

"Fēnghuá: Blowing Wind."

She once again kicked off the wind and got close to the sea drake, using the wind that wrapped her hands to slash at the monster. After a second of complete silence, the monster's head fell into the depths of the sea as the water turned crimson.

"Sorry," Adel lamented.

Having gotten rid of the monster, she returned to the ship where Maoran and Nguyen awaited her.

And so their journey resumed.

◇◆☆◆◇

"The transcontinental railroad connected the empire to the Dukedom of Haldoria, which Archduke Lucas Lebrick Haldoria established after he obtained independence. A hundred years later, its construction began. Although a series of incidents ranging from accidents to protests and monster attacks delayed the work, it was eventually completed. The cutting-edge technology and magic used at the time for the hybrid magic-powered steam engine train, the first of its kind, was so impressive that the attention of the Central Continent and the entire world turned to the dukedom."

On the video crystal screen was an up-and-coming idol, her red hair swaying in the wind. She stood by the stone monument in Fadgal Commemorative Park, next to the Metropolis Central Station. Once she finished introducing the famous transcontinental railroad that the monument celebrated, a commercial started playing. When the show returned, she appeared again inside a train.

“As you know, we have now moved to entirely magic-powered trains, and the anti-monster magic circles helped drastically reduce the number of incidents.”

The red-haired idol sat on a window seat and gazed at the scenery. The camera zoomed in, showing how the light reflected on the surface of Lake Kalashira. She went on to explain that this lake, a beautiful haven of nature near the capital of the Yutear Empire, was one of the most popular tourist attractions in the land. To keep the emphasis on the beauty of nature, the station at the edge of the lake had a simple and unassuming design, only having the necessary facilities. The idol got off the train at that station and slowly walked toward the lake, her microphone in hand.

“Historical records show that the silver witch sometimes visited Lake Kalashira. This can help us understand how the people of the capital perceived this place. They must have found solace in the beautiful lake and flower field. Nowadays, lodges and stalls have been installed along the promenade, and countless tourists visit throughout the year.”

The video cut to footage of Lake Kalashira and its surroundings. An elegant voice provided additional details while a piece of light music played in the background. Eventually, the idol appeared on the screen once more. She said a few words about the following week’s topic—another railway station located at the border between the empire and dukedom—before bidding the viewers goodbye. Then, the ending theme played, closing the curtain on this show until the following week.

Chapter 2: Counterfeit Money

While the teahouse I had opened, Grimoire, was in the merchant

district, it was quite close to the noble district. There, the daughters of wealthy merchants often crossed paths with noble ladies in disguise. Chocolate hadn't only won the hearts of our customers; it was also tremendously popular with patissiers, who loved how easy it was to work with and came up with new recipes one after the other.

"I'm glad it's a success," I said, smiling as I read the latest report of Traitre's teahouse division.

"A resounding success," acknowledged Mireille. "You can now find desserts decorated with the organizer's crest at every aristocrat's tea party. Custom-made desserts from Grimoire are all the rage among the nobles."

"Excellent. The requests to open branches in other territories are also pouring in."

"We already have our patissiers training skilled newcomers for that purpose."

"Finding competent employees will be key," I said. "Unlike Traitre stores, which I cautiously plan for, I want Grimoire to open as many additional tea houses as possible."

"Are you sure expanding so quickly is a good idea?" Mireille asked.

"Yes," I stated. "Unlike commercial firms, teahouses' scope of business is quite limited. There's little risk that they will escape my control. Besides, opening teahouses in various territories serves two purposes. It'll help us create new desserts using local products, as well as collect and disseminate information effectively."

"Duly noted. In that case, I suggest dividing the empire into several areas and assigning managers to oversee activities in each of these areas."

"I like the sound of that. Do you have anyone in mind?"

"I can think of several suitable individuals who held managerial positions in their respective companies before we absorbed them."

“Let us leave that job to them in that case.”

“I’ll make arrangements at once, miss,” concluded Mireille before exiting my office.

Traitre had kept growing, and there were more and more matters I couldn’t keep an eye on. This was a critical juncture. If I didn’t ensure that the entire management was up to par, the organization would collapse from within. *I should warn the people responsible for each department to remain vigilant.*

I leaned against my chair and stretched, extending my arms upward. As I looked at the door, it didn’t look like anyone was about to slam it open and barge in. Alice had stopped being as clingy these days, and I could let the maids take care of her while I worked.

I was talking with Lunoa and signing documents when Mireille entered my office with a bag full of coins.

“Miss Ellie, here are the gold coins we earned this month.”

“You can put it down here,” I said, gesturing toward a spot. “I’ll put it in the safe later.”

“Understood, miss.”

Lunoa didn’t show any particular reaction. When she started working for me, the sight of a bag full of gold coins impressed her so much that she almost fainted.

She grew up, I thought.

Mireille put the bag on Lunoa’s desk, and the coins inside clinked.

“Hmm?” I let out, puzzled. I stood up and approached Lunoa’s desk.

“What’s wrong, Miss Ellie?” Lunoa asked, looking up at me.

I was too preoccupied with the coins to answer her. I opened the bag and took one out, looking at it from every angle before saying, “Lunoa, could you use Item Analysis on this?”

“Huh?”

I handed her the coin and urged her, “Hurry.”

“O-Okay!”

She put it on her desk and covered it with her hand, closing her eyes.

“O soul that inhabits all things... Lay yourself bare in front of me! Item Analysis!” she chanted.

She suddenly opened her eyes wide in surprise.

“Something’s off!” she exclaimed. “The mineral ratio is all wrong!”

I knew it. The clinking of the coins had sounded strange! However, no matter how much I looked at it, it looked like gold.

“Misha, bring me a scale and a knife.”

“At once!”

I checked the weight, which was the same as a regular gold coin. Even when I scraped the surface with my knife, it still looked like gold. Yet Lunoa’s analysis showed this was not a regular gold coin.

“This leaves me with one option.”

I raised the knife and reinforced it with my mana, then brought it down onto the coin and sliced it in half. Something black appeared in the middle.

The empire’s gold coins were ninety percent gold and ten percent silver. This black core had nothing to do inside.

“As I feared, those are fake coins,” I stated.

I inspected the black fragments on the table. The larger pieces appeared to be an ore, but some places had started shattering and turning into powder.

“Lunoa, can you tell what that is?”

“N-No, I’m sorry. My spell won’t let me know the details.”

“I see.”

There were several types of Analysis spells: Stone Analysis, Plant Analysis, Being Analysis, Skill Analysis, and others. They all had various effects and applications; some were more specialized than others. Lunoa’s Item Analysis was a rare spell that one could use on a wide range of items. But these spells had the same limitation—they could not analyze things the user did not recognize. They drew upon the user’s knowledge and compared it with the appraisal target. Expanding one’s knowledge was indispensable to use this spell effectively. In this particular case, Lunoa’s unawareness of minerals and metals limited her.

If Lunoa couldn’t tell, there was no need to push her. I picked up another coin and observed it more closely, unable to stop thinking this was strange. This kind of counterfeit money made little sense to me.

“How peculiar,” I said.

“Indeed,” Mireille agreed.

“What is so strange?” Lunoa asked.

Misha looked just as confused.

“It’s just too well-made,” I said.

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Lunoa, what do you think is the point of counterfeit money?”

“Well, the point is to make it for cheaper than real money so you can profit off the difference in value…isn’t it?”

“Exactly. That is how it usually works.” My answer confused them further, so I continued, “The empire added several details to their coins to stop counterfeit money from circulating. Most people don’t even know about them, but after checking these coins thoroughly, I see that all these details have been perfectly copied. This means that whoever made them spent a lot of time researching those coins and invested sizable funds in securing a facility and hiring skilled artisans to produce them. Despite the discrepancy in the ratio, there is still a lot of gold in these. The black mineral has been used to replace some of it, so the value of these coins is lower than official ones, but it is still relatively high considering the amount of gold.”

“In other words, these counterfeit coins are still worth a lot of money.”

“Indeed. Things just don’t add up if you think of the time, money, and effort put into them. To benefit, one would have to distribute incredibly large amounts of coins. But with so many fake coins going around, people are bound to notice. This is a high-risk, low-return endeavor. Besides, only the imperial government or tremendously wealthy merchants would ever make transactions amounting to such sums. In most cases, appraisers are present, increasing the risks of being caught.”

Mireille nodded along as I spoke.

“That is why most counterfeit coins are gilded iron. They’re crude and usually only ever circulate in the countryside.”

“Then why were these even made?” wondered Lunoa.

“Well… If I had to guess, I’d say that this is another country’s attempt at destabilizing the empire through its currency.”

“D-Destabilizing…?”

“Those who did this are not trying to make a profit,” I explained. “Their goal is most likely to destroy the empire’s currency’s credibility on the international stage.”

“Err... I’m not sure I follow.”

“What do you think will happen if word spreads that there are fake coins circulating in the empire?”

“Everyone will start doubting their coins,” Lunoa said after thinking for a moment. “They’ll suspect they might have received counterfeits!”

“Exactly. Many countries produce their own gold and silver coins on the Central Continent. However, those who hold the most credibility—or in other words, the most value—are the coins of the empire and the kingdom. People can use them in many countries without even needing to exchange them. If the empire’s currency loses value, the kingdom’s coins will become the only commonly accepted currency. The empire’s economy will suffer while the kingdom takes a big step toward dominating the entire continent.”

Lunoa turned pale as she started understanding the implications. She exclaimed, “W-We need to arrest the culprit before it gets to this!”

“I agree,” I said. “But it may prove difficult if the source is a foreign country...”

“How so?”

“The imperial authorities do not have the right to investigate foreign organizations. We’ll need to find out which country the culprit is fromand gather solid evidence before we can bring this matter to another government and request that they open an investigation. Considering the quality of these coins, a high-ranked individual must be involved.”

“D-Does that mean that a foreign aristocrat is behind all this?!”

“It’s highly likely,” I concluded.

Allowing this counterfeit money to spread would spell trouble.

“Mireille,” I said. “I need you to hire appraisers at once and have them authenticate our funds.”

“Understood, miss. How should I go about it?”

“I wish I could have them authenticate every single coin, but that would be impossible. Pick out random samples and investigate the remaining money from the same source whenever a fake is found. I want to know where we got them from.”

“All right.”

“Misha, ready the carriage and send notice to the Merchants’ Guild. Write that I have an important matter to discuss and that time is of the essence.”

“Yes!”

Upon leaving orders to Mireille and the others, I left for the Merchants’ Guild with Misha. Thanks to the notice I’d sent ahead, or perhaps due to my Special License, I was shown to a drawing room straightaway. I entered to find a demon man, Calvan, the Guild Master, waiting for me. I knew him as the right-hand man of the grand master of the empire’s Merchants’ Guild, Albert Guide.

“Thank you very much for making time for me so suddenly, Guild Master,” I greeted him.

“It’s only natural. You said the matter was urgent,” replied Calvan. “Lord Guide should be receiving you, but he’s away in his territory. I hope you won’t mind my covering for him.”

“Of course not, Guild Master.”

Calvan gestured for me to sit, and I took a place opposite him. Misha stood behind me.

“Shall we get down to business?” he asked.

“Yes, let us start. Misha, if you please.”

“Yes, miss!”

Misha retrieved a small pouch from the satchel she was carrying

and handed it to me. I took one of the counterfeit coins out and set it down in front of Calvan.

“A gold coin?” he said, baffled. He picked it up and started to observe it. “It seems perfectly normal... No... Something’s off!” He gawked, likely having used an appraisal spell with Silent Casting. “It’s fake.”

“Indeed. Please have a look at this,” I said, taking out the coin I’d cut in two.

“I see... This is scrap iron.”

“So this was scrap iron...”

When alchemists created magical alloys, they often used iron as the catalyst. Scrap iron was the remnant of this reaction. It was hard and heavy yet brittle—useless garbage.

“Local Alchemists’ Guild collect scrap iron and dispose of it. It shouldn’t be available through regular means,” Calvan mused, bringing his hand to his chin. Shortly after, he asked, “Do you know what country these coins are from?”

He seemed to have reached the same conclusion as me.

“My people are trying to find out,” I said.

“Not long ago, we had to deal with a king poison slime, and now this... I fear the two incidents may be connected.”

“That is possible,” I expressed. “I shall investigate the matter.”

“I’ll have the guild’s investigators do the same,” he said. “If you learn anything, please let me know. I’ll purchase worthwhile information at a high price.”

“I’ll inform you at once if I do.”

After my discussion with Calvan, I headed straight home.

“Miss Ellie!” Mireille called, running up to me as soon as I arrived. “We’ve found the source of the fake coins!”

“That was quick... Were you able to trace every firm it transited through already?”

“I obtained this information through other means.”

“Other means?” I repeated.

“Yes. I’ve received word from our allies in Haldoria.”

I started to see where this was going and brought my hand to my forehead, sighing deeply. In all likelihood...

“And?” I asked, hoping to confirm my suspicions.

“The counterfeit money comes from Funnel, the firm you used to operate in the kingdom.”

Funnel Commercial Firm was the company I’d put together in the kingdom to secure personal funds. The blasted Haldorian prince had stolen it from me by replacing my people with his. At the moment, it was under the control of his followers—a bunch of opportunistic merchants and noblemen. Friede only knew to conduct business through strength, so the firm’s reputation had dropped like a rock.

“How is Funnel doing these days?” I asked.

“According to the reports I’ve received, the prince runs it in the most unethical way. Some product deals fell through after you left, so they cut costs and mass-produced the flagship cosmetic products to make up for it. The raw materials have been replaced with cheaper alternatives, and the successive layoffs have burdened the remaining employees, so they’re barely hanging on. The quality of the products has dropped terribly. Many customers have lodged complaints for skin irritation and other issues, but the prince quashes every claim with his authority.”

Mireille paused briefly before continuing.

“Their business partners are also in a difficult situation: with the prince using his name to push the company, they cannot cut ties so easily. Not to mention that Funnel seems to have ties with criminal organizations. The current representative of the firm, Colt Lampton, is the son of Marquess Lampton, the minister of finance and one of the prince’s closest followers. He’s not particularly good at the job and worries more about how big of a cut he can take for himself than about the good of the business. The rest of the management is much like him.”

“I’m impressed the firm has yet to go under,” I said. “It doesn’t sound like they make much money.”

“It appears they report false numbers to the prince,” Mireille informed me. “They inflate their earnings by contracting debts in his name.”

The scale of the disaster Funnel had become almost made me dizzy. My company used to have ample funds, but they’d run it into the ground in a matter of years.

“Funnel isn’t what it once was,” I let out.

“What should we do, miss?”

“Let me think...”

It was about time I did something about my old company, and the upper management Friede had placed there seemed to be idiots.

“Do we still have insiders at Funnel?”

“Most of those who were loyal to you left long ago. There are only a handful of people we can count on. Besides, Colt seems to plan his moves cautiously. Production was well underway when our people heard about the counterfeit money.”

I closed my eyes to collect my thoughts. After a few moments, I spoke again, “Let’s get rid of those people who turned the firm *I* started into this. Create a dummy company in the kingdom and lure Funnel in with the promise of a big purchase.”

“Understood, miss. I’ll pick the perfect people for this mission at once.”

I nodded and called for Lunoa and Misha, ready with orders for the two of them.

“We’re heading to Lebrick County. Get everything ready.”

◆

“Heh heh... Luck is finally on my side,” Colt said, unable to repress a smirk.

He sat in his office at Funnel’s headquarters in the royal capital of Haldoria, sipping a cuvée of the finest quality.

The first part of his father, the minister of finance’s plan, had gone without a hitch. He’d fanned the flames and encouraged Friede to get rid of Elizabeth while siding with Sylvia, the prince’s new fiancée, so he could rise to power. To do so, he married one of his relatives into a branch of House Lockit and brought the entire family under his wing. However, nothing had gone well these days. The prince kept making blunders that chipped away at his influence.

“Father is being too indirect,” Colt continued. “He remained in Elizabeth’s shadow for so long. I would have seized power far quicker.”

For generations, House Lampton had gradually gotten closer to the heart of the kingdom. It was time for the marquess to reach for the prize. Until a couple of years ago, one major obstacle stood in his way: Elizabeth. No matter how high he rose, he could not make use of his influence in court with her there. She would not let him. And so, for the longest time, Marquess Lampton bid his time. He pretended to be loyal to her, all while plotting her demise. The whole time, Colt looked down on his father for being too slow, too cowardly.

Colt was finally entrusted a role to play by the prince, which he intended to carry out perfectly. He had no doubt he’d do a lot better than his father.

“Some great self-confidence you’ve got there, boss,” said Barl, a burly man who did not even try to conceal his hoodlum air. He took a big gulp from the bottle he held.

Colt had hired him as a bodyguard after he started distributing fake coins in the empire. His acquaintances had introduced him to

the man, and he recognized his strength despite the other's lack of refinement. It was enough to instantly defeat a former Rank A adventurer and hit man in the employ of a viscount family.

"I worried a little when His Highness ordered me to forge imperial coins, so I'll give you that. But it all went fine, thanks to his additional funds," Colt said.

"What's the point, though?" asked Barl. "You spent so much making those things you'll never even break even."

"His Highness isn't trying to make money. His objective is to lower the credibility of the imperial coins."

"Credibility, huh?" Barl repeated, puzzled. "Yeah, don't get it."

"You don't need to," Cold said. "Stay quiet and keep me safe. That'll be more than enough."

"Sure. I don't give a damn about politics, anyway. Keep paying me, and I'll knock out anyone who comes your way."

◆

Lucas was wracking his brains in his office.

"Say, haven't far too many merchants been coming in from Haldoria these past two months?"

He put down a document on his subordinate's desk. The man paused his work to read it, shifting his expression.

"There are many, indeed," said the subordinate after finishing. "If one looks only at the daily figures, it doesn't seem that strange, but they certainly add up."

"Do you know why that is?" Lucas asked.

"I wonder. Several years have passed since the truce began. I suppose our economic ties deepening make sense, but..."

While the official relations between the two nations remained

tense, there were still exchanges. Merchants on either side prioritized benefits and were willing to engage in trade without hesitation, even with the people of a country that had long been at odds with their own. Even at a national level, such exchanges were primarily positive. What bothered Lucas, however, was this sudden change. It seemed unnatural, as though forced. Someone must be urging Haldorian merchants to commerce with the empire.

"Investigate these merchants and find out what they're after. I also want to know if someone is backing them," Lucas ordered.

"I'll make arrangements at once, my lord."

Lucas sipped tea as he watched the man leave his office to carry out his order.

"I do hope these are groundless fears..." he whispered.

He did not yet know what these merchants' objective was or if they had any ulterior motives. Perhaps their products just sold well in the empire these days, and they sought profit. While he hoped that would be the conclusion of his investigation, he could not help the unease that assaulted him.

◇

After our group made preparations as swiftly as possible, we boarded the carriage and departed for Lebrick County. Ever since I relocated my headquarters to the capital, Lunoa's father had been in charge of the Lebrick branch. But this case required me to be as close to the kingdom as possible, and Lebrick County fit the bill perfectly.

I hadn't reported what I'd learned about Funnel to the Merchants' Guild for now. The main reason was that I had no proof other than the word of my spies. Even if we could initiate an investigation, all Funnel would have to do was cut the loose ends. Furthermore, I was unhappy with what these people had done with the firm *I*'d built. I wanted to crush them with my own two hands, which made me decide to move independently this time. The Merchants' Guild would eventually discover the culprits, but that

was fine.

On our way to Lebrick County, we passed through a rather unsafe territory and reached an area where logs had blocked the road. Mireille stopped the carriage, and a few seconds later, a group of brigands emerged from the bushes that bordered the road.

“Not again,” I said, sighing.

“Mama?” Alice said, appearing scared

I patted her head and held her against me to ease her worries.

“Everything is going to be fine,” I told her.

Mireille left the driver’s box and entered the carriage. I left Alice to her and stepped out, sword in hand.

We’d run into brigands on our way to the capital too. *Aren’t there a little too many brigands around here?* I couldn’t help but wonder. The lord of this territory was obviously terrible at his job, but this was still too much. I would have expected the merchants who frequently traversed these paths and the locals to have requested help from adventurers by now. The most likely reason was that they were somehow linked with the lord. Come to think of it, the brigands I’d fought here before seemed to be doing well for themselves. They used fairly decent weapons, and some even had gold teeth. This new group also had good equipment as well as horses to carry their spoils with them. They weren’t broke farmers, and that much was certain.

I fought while pondering over the situation and had killed three of them before I knew it, even spotting Misha slicing open the throat of another from the corner of my eye.

“W-Wait! We surrender! We’re done so stop!”

The four remaining brigands threw their weapons to the ground and lifted their hands.

“You wish to surrender? I wonder how you’ve treated merchants

who pleaded the same way so far…"

The brigands' faces turned pale, showing these men knew what they were doing. This wasn't the first time they attacked people. Misha watched them cry and beg for their lives, her eyes cold as ice. Our confrontation with bandits in Milista had fazed her, but she'd overcome this and could now fight and kill such criminals without mercy.

"How should we deal with them, Miss Ellie?" she asked, her voice deeper than usual.

I pointed at the most muscular man and answered, "Keep this one alive. I have no use for the rest."

"Understood."

"Wh-What?!" one of them yelled as Misha rushed toward him. She stabbed him in the throat, and he let out a gurgling sound.

Another brigand turned his back to us and desperately tried to flee. Misha threw her dagger at him before moving on to the last man. He'd fallen to the ground, the fear most likely paralyzing him, and Misha grabbed his head, twisting it with her bare hands. She was still young and much smaller than the brigands, yet her natural strength that was further reinforced by her skills was impressive. The man's head twisted at an unnatural angle, foaming at the mouth.

Now that only one was left, it was time to move on.

"Lunoa," I called out.

"Y-Yes!" she yelped.

She'd been hiding inside the carriage during the fight and timidly came out.

"Do you remember what we discussed in the capital? Have you found your resolve?"

"I-I have! I-I'll be fine!"

Lunoa dreamed of becoming an accomplished merchant. Although she studied diligently to make it a reality, she still needed to overcome several trials. It was time for her to tackle one of them. There were no clear, objective rules for determining what made someone a good merchant. But I would not recognize her as a fully-fledged merchant capable of standing on her own until she met my conditions.

I threw one of the weapons that had fallen to the ground at the brigand.

"If you can defeat this girl, you're free," I told him. "You win if she dies, cannot continue fighting, or admits defeat. If you can make that happen, I'll let you go. But if you try to flee during the fight, I'll personally make your head roll."

"What?!"

I ignored the man and faced Lunoa, putting my hands on her shoulders, and said, "You're more than strong enough for this, Lunoa. Do not hesitate. Go for the kill. You must be able to protect yourself to become a full-fledged merchant."

"Yes, Miss Ellie!"

Lunoa had fought goblins and orcs I'd previously weakened for her, but never humans. Her inability to do so might prevent her from traveling along dangerous roads in the future.

Needless to say, not all merchants could fight. Most could only more or less defend themselves and hire guards to escort them. However, I firmly believed that, regardless of the strength of your guards, only you could truly protect yourself. If Lunoa couldn't kill to save her life, I'd push her to accept a safer job, such as being an appraiser for Traitre.

Lunoa took out her favorite staff and raised it. At this sight, the brigand readied the sword I'd given him.

While I'd told him he'd win if he killed her, I had no intention of letting that happen. I just wanted Lunoa to have some practical

training. If I sensed that she was in actual danger, I'd step in and kill him promptly. I also had superior potions I'd bought from Yuu in case anything went wrong.

I took a few steps back, and the fight between Lunoa and the brigand began.

◆

The brigand contemplated his situation. He and his associates had run into the perfect prey—a group of girls without guards. They'd happily rushed in to attack them only to find themselves overpowered by that silver-haired woman and the beastkin kid who seemed to serve her. There had been thirty at the start, but most had been killed in the blink of an eye. Running away hadn't even been an option. Those who'd tried had fallen to the knives thrown from afar by the maid who'd been driving their carriage. Even though they'd discarded their weapons and surrendered, the silver-haired woman hadn't batted an eye. She'd ordered the beastkin kid to kill them anyway. Only he remained alive, then had a weapon thrown at him and told to fight another kid.

Judging by her looks, she was just a regular human kid. She had a staff, so he assumed she was a mage. Their earlier conversation made it sound like that kid was the silver-haired woman's disciple. He realized the woman was likely using him to have the girl gain experience in a real fight. The woman said he was free to kill his opponent, but the man doubted that. Should he kill or maim the disciple, she might fly into a rage. In that case, there was only one way for him to live: defeat the kid without inflicting severe wounds on her.

He brandished his sword and took a step forward.

◇

The brigand slashed at Lunoa, appearing nervous but not panicking.

Mireille was keeping an eye on our surroundings, while Misha watched over Lunoa with an air of concern. I, too, observed silently.

[image]

“Shoot forth, Air Bullet!” Lunoa chanted after dodging the brigand’s blade.

She’d left out part of the incantation. The simplified chant did not give her enough time to envision the spell entirely, losing power, although it still struck the man.

“Urgh!” he groaned.

Even though her spell could have been more powerful, it still hurt if the man’s grimace was any indication. He gritted his teeth and pushed through the pain, slashing at Lunoa once again. She stepped back at the right moment to dodge and fired another Air Bullet.

“Argh!”

After several Air Bullets, Lunoa mixed in an Air Slash. The man thought he could endure it, just like the previous attacks, but it cut open his arms. His blood started spilling and he lowered his sword arm. Lunoa took advantage of that opportunity, closing the distance that separated them. She surrounded her fist with wind magic and sent the man flying.

The spell she’d used was called Air Hand, which lost a lot of impact since she’d used Silent Casting. A well-executed Air Hand would have punched a hole in her opponent’s belly. Lunoa’s version, on the other hand, was only strong enough to send him crashing against a large tree.

Still, she had hit a good spot, making the man moan in pain and unable to get up. Lunoa noticed, and she glanced my way. I did not budge. She took a moment to make up her mind before approaching him cautiously.

“W-Wait... Ah... Please... Wait...” the man begged, shrinking back. One of his legs was bent in an unnatural angle. It was broken, and he couldn’t even attempt to run. “I won’t ever attack anyone else! I promise! I’ll turn myself in to the guards, so please! Let me

live!”

Lunoa did not reply.

“Please, miss! I don’t want to die! Please!”

It took Lunoa some time, but she eventually started chanting, “O winds that blow across the wilderness, merge into a single blade and strike: Air Slash!”

She’d recited the entire incantation, then a power blade of wind hit the man’s torso, slicing him into two.

“Sa…ve… me…” he drawled, extending his arm toward Lunoa before letting out his last breath. His raised arm immediately hit the ground.

Lunoa started panting, struggling to breathe. I approached and petted her.

“You did well, Lunoa,” I praised.

“M-Miss Ellie…”

“You’ve helped clean up this area,” I continued. “Brigands are just like garbage. They must be disposed of. Unlike monsters, they do not act on instinct. That makes them far worse than goblins. You did the right thing.”

“Y-Yes.”

“You don’t need to drive with Mireille anymore. Get some rest, all right?”

I left Lunoa with Misha inside the carriage and went to sit in the driver’s box with Alice on my knees.

Mireille sat beside me and asked, “Wasn’t it too soon for Lunoa?”

“It’s something she would have needed to go through sooner or later. The shock will be hard to bear for some time, but she will eventually understand that this was for the best. For now, let us be

kind and considerate to her."

"Of course."

We continued to travel with Lunoa, who'd just overcome a big hurdle, by our side. Though it took us longer than usual, we eventually reached Lebrick County.

I left Alice in Misha's care and headed to Traitre's branch office. After expressing my thanks to the staff who'd come to welcome us, I joined Grantz and the rest of the management.

"Thank you for visiting us, Miss Ellie," Grantz said.

"It has been far too long, Grantz. Tell me, how is Lunoa?"

"She spent some time with her mother and seems to be doing fine."

"I see. That's good to hear. Please take good care of her."

"We will."

By the time we arrived in Lebrick County, Lunoa had mostly calmed down. Nonetheless, we immediately brought her to her parents' house so she could be with them. According to her father, she seemed to have overcome her concerns.

"Have you been able to carry out my request?" I asked, moving on to business.

"We have. Stia, if you please."

"Here are the documents you asked for, Miss Ellie. Oh, and we've already decided in which country we'd establish it," said Stia.

"Good work."

"We've also made an appointment with Lord Lucas for you. He's invited you to join him for dinner."

“Perfect. I’ll look at these papers before I go, then.”

The sun had started setting and I was on my way to Lucas’s residence. I’d worn a lovely yet subdued dress. Mireille was sitting next to me in the carriage while Misha drove. The long journey had tired Alice, causing her to fall asleep, so I entrusted her to the Carltons for tonight.

As soon as we arrived at the Lebrick Estate, Lucas’s servants welcomed us and showed us to the drawing room where he was waiting.

“I haven’t had the pleasure to see you in a long time, Miss Ellie,” he said.

“Likewise, my lord,” I replied.

After exchanging pleasantries and discussing our current situations, we moved to another room with a set dinner table. Only Lucas and I sat down, as Mireille and Misha would eat in a separate room.

“You’ve changed a little,” Lucas said.

“Oh my, have I?”

“When you escaped from the kingdom, you seemed more on edge.”

“Indeed... That might be true.”

He was right, I wasn’t as tense anymore. I hadn’t forgotten my thirst for revenge. Rage welled up deep within me whenever I thought of the way they’d treated me when I was in the kingdom, the way they’d dragged my name through the mud after I fled. But somewhere along the way I began enjoying my current life. My meetings with Lunoa, Misha, and more recently Alice had brought me joy.

“Not to mention the fact that you suddenly adopted a child,” he continued. “I must confess that surprised me. Alice, was it?”

“Things turned out this way,” I replied. “But that does not mean my goal has changed.”

“Oh, I know that. You’ve already caused quite the stir.”

“You must be referring to Robert.”

“Certainly. The kingdom is still struggling with the aftermath. Although I suppose they brought that upon themselves. For the most part, at least.”

“Why, I see we agree. Although I’m surprised they’ve yet to make a move when I acted so boldly,” I said.

“I can only assume they haven’t had the luxury to look into the matter as closely as you’d expect. Still, it’s only a matter of time before they find you.”

“I’m aware. Thus, I’ve made preparations to evade any pursuers the kingdom may send my way.”

We enjoyed our food, alternating between lighter and more unsettling topics. Once we finished eating our desserts, servants brought coffee to the table. I had a few sips in silence before moving on to the next topic.

“If you’ll allow me, I’d like to touch upon the reason for my visit today,” I started. “The Kingdom of Haldoria is spreading counterfeit imperial coins. They’ve moved on to economic warfare.”

“What?!”

“The royal family…or rather Prince Friede is pulling the strings in the shadows. Many coins have already found their way into the empire.”

“How troublesome…”

“I’ve already reported this to the Merchants’ Guild,” I informed him.

“I see… And here I thought there were far too many merchants

from the kingdom these days."

"I'm sure quite a few did so at Friede's bidding."

Lucas brought a hand to his forehead, then exasperatedly asked, "And? What are *you* planning?"

"Simple," I answered. "I'll crush the people who did this."

"Are you doing this to get back at Prince Friede?"

"I won't deny that is part of it, but the main reason is that the Funnel Commercial Firm I left behind is responsible for this."

"Oh, the firm Prince Friede hijacked by replacing the management."

"Indeed. Funnel was mine. I shall take this chance to clean up after me."

"All right. However, this leaves me with another question. Why did you come to me?"

"I'd like to request your help."

I put my coffee cup on the table and explained my current plan to Lucas.

"Is that truly possible?" he asked after a pause.

"Friede's reputation within the palace is at an all-time low. Roselia Fadgal holds the real power, and Friede is desperate to steal it back. He'll bite, I'm sure of it."

Lucas stared at me without answering.

"If this succeeds, your achievements will be recognized too, my lord."

"All right," Lucas concluded after thinking it through. "This was our arrangement from the start."

"Indeed. You helped me in my time of need. As promised, I shall

make sure you reap the reward."

"Yet I must cross a dangerous bridge to seize that reward."

"That hasn't changed from the start," I acknowledged, smiling.

He smiled back. "Very true."

The two of us shook hands.

◆

Friede held in his laughter as he listened to Colt's report in his personal chambers.

"You did great, Colt!"

"I thank you for your praise, Your Highness!"

Colt had brought him documents detailing the exact number of counterfeit coins circulating in the empire and the benefits they'd made so far. That money couldn't compare to the sums the prince had poured into the project, though none of that mattered. If they kept at it for another half month, the empire's economy would suffer tremendously.

"The empire will fall. And I, the one who made it happen, shall push my father to the side and sit on the throne," Friede said.

"You shall. I fear the years have made our good king weak. He seeks to restrain you without understanding your might. Allowing His Majesty to rest is the greatest act of kindness you could show him. It is truly time for you to take your rightful place and ascend the throne!"

"Quite so! Ha ha ha! When the time comes, I'll make you minister of finance in your father's stead, Colt."

"I-I... The minister of finance?!" Colt exclaimed.

While he ensured his tone conveyed surprise, he couldn't help but think it was natural. After all, he was far superior to his father.

“I’ll reform the entire court when I’m king,” responded Friede. “These old men have had their time. The fools in charge of finances are the worst of them all. They keep bringing up Elizabeth’s policies while standing in my way! My kingdom does not need her or her policies! I’ll also get rid of that darned Roselia. Our era has started, Colt. We’ll rebuild this country anew.”

“You never fail to amaze me, Your Highness! I can’t think of anyone more worthy of leading Haldoria into the future!”

Friede laughed. “Now, now, no need for flattery.”

Despite what he’d just said, Colt’s words had undoubtedly put him in a good mood. Colt knew he was on the right path.

“Still, thanks to my lord father and his lack of foresight, I’m under house arrest. I won’t be able to do much publicly.”

“What of the funding, Your Highness? I understand you cannot access the national treasury at the moment.”

“Don’t worry about that. I have my ways.”

“Your ways?”

“The archbishop of the Church of Ibris is on my side.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes, so no need to worry about the money. Focus on your tasks.”

“Understood, Your Highness! I must also make arrangements for the party next month.”

While Friede’s father had taken away his power as the crown prince, he still held that position. He had to attend parties and prepare for them.

“Good grief, we never stop being busy, do we?” remarked Friede, sighing.

The party set to take place today would celebrate the truce between the Yutear Empire and the Kingdom of Haldoria. Both great nations had agreed on a twenty-year nonaggression pact and celebrated that yearly. At about the same time this party would occur, another would take place in the empire. There, several high-profile noblemen from the Haldoria would attend to represent the kingdom.

Friede listened without paying much attention to his father's wish for prosperity between the kingdom and the empire, forcing a smile. His fiancée, Sylvia, was by his side.

"Hello, Your Highness."

By then, Friede finished greeting most of the people he needed to when someone spoke to him. It was a nobleman from the empire who was a couple of years older than himself and served as the empire's ambassador in the kingdom.

For all his flaws, Friede was a prince who'd received a strict education. He immediately hid the shadow of displeasure that threatened to twist his features and replaced it with a friendly smile.

"It has been far too long, Viscount— No, I heard you were recently promoted to count, were you not? It is a little late, but let me congratulate you, Count Lebrick."

"Thank you very much, Your Highness," Lucas replied. "To tell you the truth, I've come to you tonight looking for advice."

"Of what kind?"

"It pertains to the future of our nations."

Friede left Sylvia at the reception and brought Lucas to a small room so they could talk. The two sat opposite, and Friede asked, "So, what is this about?"

"Some years have passed since the empire and the kingdom signed an armistice. I believe it is time for our countries to take the next step."

Friede hummed, urging him to continue.

Lucas said, “Therefore, I’d like us to relax the restrictions on trading currently limited goods such as wheat and potatoes as well as partially lift the regulations on restricted items. I also hope to reduce tariffs between our two countries.”

“You’re proposing we sign a commercial treaty?”

“Not quite. I’m offering to revise the current treaty,” stated Lucas, smiling. He took out a stack of papers and set it on the table. “Here are the revisions the empire is hoping for.”

Friede started reading through the pages. Enacting these changes would increase the volume of commercial exchanges tenfold between the empire and Haldoria. Nothing appeared particularly out of place. If anything, the conditions were slightly advantageous for the kingdom.

If the treaty was revised this way, Friede could spread his fake coins much quicker throughout the empire. However, he still felt the need to probe.

“I like the sound of this,” he started. “But I’m afraid I cannot accept under the current conditions.”

“What seems to be the issue, Your Highness?”

“The tariffs,” noted Friede. “Reducing them is fine, but I’d like you to accommodate the kingdom a little more.”

“The tariffs? I believe the conditions we laid down on the matter showed more than enough consideration for the kingdom,” Lucas answered.

“Needless to say, I’m not asking you to change the terms to our advantage without receiving something in return. If there is anything your side hopes for, I shall be happy to consider it.”

“Hmm... Would you be open to the idea of signing a secondary treaty to lay out the fine commercial details? As for your concerns on the tariffs... We could offer you a time-limited arrangement.”

“A time-limited arrangement?

“We are willing to give the kingdom favorable treatment on tariffs for ten years.”

“Ten years... All right. And what of that secondary treaty you speak of?”

“Oh, it would be nothing much,” declared Lucas. “Its purpose would be to adjust the balance and fill out the gaps of the current treaty. Such treaties are signed every day.”

Lucas took out more documents as he spoke, and Friede couldn’t help but think he was a little *too* well-prepared. He carefully studied the papers, making it apparent he had most likely been aiming to get this treaty signed from the start. While he’d confer an advantage to the kingdom for ten years, the two nations would end up on equal footing afterward. The achievement of successfully signing a commercial treaty with the kingdom would boost Lucas’s reputation. The ambitious young noble had just been awarded a higher title, and Friede had no doubt he wanted more. Sadly for Lucas, the empire’s economy would be in tatters in ten years.

The corners of Friede’s mouth curlsed up at the thought of that possibility. Friede handed back the documents to Lucas and said, “All right, I accept.”

“Thank you, Your Highness!” exclaimed Lucas, taking Friede’s right hand in both of his and beaming.

Friede squeezed back with a smile. He couldn’t wait for the empire’s downfall and looked at Lucas, imagining the other’s tearful face.

[image]

Upon bidding farewell to the prince, Colt returned to his home—the Lampton Estate. As usual, he intended to go straight to his room to drink, but the butler stopped him.

“Young Master Colt, your father awaits you in his office.”

“He does? All right, I’ll go to him.”

Colt knocked on the door, and his father’s voice came from inside, allowing him to enter.

“Did you need me, father?” he asked, entering the room.

The current minister of finance, Codak Lampton, gestured for his son to take place on the sofa and sat opposite him.

“You seem to be hard at work managing the company His Highness entrusted you these days,” Codak said.

For a moment, Colt didn’t know what to answer. Had his father discovered the counterfeit money? Codak’s expression was impossible to read.

Colt composed himself and replied, “Funnel is one of the leading firms in the kingdom, after all.”

Despite his worries, his father did not bring up the coins.

“That’s good,” said Codak. “Profiting off the royal family is our way of life. With that detestable girl out of the way, our era has come, son. It’s only a matter of time before we, the Lamptons, seize the real power. We’re at a critical juncture. Do not make any mistakes, and pay attention to your surroundings, Colt.”

“You do not need to worry, father. I found myself a good bodyguard.”

“You mean that vulgar man?”

“Indeed. Barl is an insolent lowlife, but he’s strong. Besides, his ties to the underworld mean he has access to information and networks. I’m always under protection.”

“I see. You can go now.”

“I shall take my leave, then, father.”

Just as Colt stood up and turned his back to his father, Codak

spoke up again.

“Colt,” he said. “His Highness is a fool. Use him, but never put your trust in him.”

“I’m aware, father.”

Colt bowed to his father before walking away. Despite his neutral expression, he thought that his father too was just as foolish.

A few days after his father’s warning, Colt received a guest at Funnel.

“Thank you for coming,” he said, welcoming the man into the drawing room.

“Thank for for having me,” the man responded.

The man appeared in his thirties and was rather unremarkable. He said he worked for a midsized company based in one of Haldoria’s vassal nations.

“Allow me to introduce myself once more. I’m Maverick from the Elisabeth Commercial Firm.”

“I’m Colt, chair of the Funnel Commercial Firm.”

The two men shook hands and swiftly moved on to business once they introduced themselves.

“Our company managed a store in the capital of the Kingdom of Mellina, which receives the gracious protection of Haldoria. We’re considering opening a branch in Haldoria, and I’ve been appointed as a representative for this project. I’ve requested this appointment to discuss the possibility of a partnership with Funnel.”

“Why did you reach out to us in particular?”

“Naturally, the fact that Funnel is one of the largest firms in the kingdom played a part. But the real reason is that we’ve noticed

that you recently put a lot of effort into trading with the empire."

"You've done your research."

"For a humble company such as ours to remain in business, that is a must," added Maverick. "After all, we depend on the goodwill of others to survive."

"So, what are our recent exchanges with the empire to do with the matter?"

"We'd like to start conducting business in the empire as well."

"I see. You figured that a partnership with us could allow you to kill two birds with one stone."

"Exactly."

Funnel had recently conducted many large transactions using its counterfeit coins, so the amount of requests it received was also rising.

"All right, I get it," Colt said. "I need to discuss this with my executives. I'll get back to you with an answer in a couple of days."

"I understand. Thank you very much for your consideration."

Maverick bowed politely before leaving the room. Once he was gone, Colt turned toward the hoodlum drinking alcohol in a corner of his office.

"Barl."

"What d'ya want?"

"What do you think of the man who was just here?"

"He's pretty suspicious if ya ask me. He doesn't seem like an experienced businessman, and he twitched when I let out my bloodlust. That guy's from the underworld."

"Can you find out who's behind that Elisabeth Firm?"

“Sure can, but it’s gonna cost you more than my usual fee.”

“I don’t mind.”

“On it,” said Barl. “Oh, and make sure to pay me real coins.” He let out a vulgar laugh before leaving the room.

While Colt met with Maverick, Friede waited in his father’s office.

“Friede! How dare you?!”

The angry voice of the master of the castle reverberated around the room. Just then, the prince gave his father a sullen look and shrugged.

“What are you so angry about, father?” inquired Friede.

“Your irresponsibility! I ordered you to get Roselia’s approval before making any decisions. Yet you dared agree to a treaty with the empire alone?!”

“How is that my fault? I did my duty and attended the party as the crown prince. Their ambassador approached me there. Was I supposed to tell him I couldn’t discuss such matters without my aide and send him away?”

“That’s—”

“Besides, I only signed this treaty for the good of the kingdom.”

Bulat groaned and glanced at his prime minister. Sieg reviewed every detail of the new commercial treaty binding the empire and the kingdom.

“There is nothing wrong with the treaty, Your Majesty,” Sieg said. “Most of the articles are slight revisions of the current treaty, as well as minute adjustments and legal arrangements. Everything seems fine. The terms are quite similar to the treaties we have with other nations. If anything, the clause on tariffs benefits us greatly.”

“Fine... I’ll let things slide this time. You may go, Friede. Good job.”

“Thank you. Good day, father.” The prince left with a victorious smile on his lips.

“Are you quite certain everything is in order?” wondered Bulat once he was gone.

“Yes, Your Majesty. I believe the prince must be commended for his achievement this time.”

“How is that possible? I was so sure the empire’s ambassador would have deceived him by smooth-talking.”

“According to His Highness, he rejected the ambassador’s first offer and pushed him to give us favorable terms. As soon as His Highness agreed to limit his advantage in time, the ambassador accepted his condition.”

Sieg brought his hand to his chin in thought.

“So he was so eager to close the deal that he was willing to take this small loss?” Bulat asked.

“It seems like it. Count Lebrick has recently received a higher peerage. He must hope to strengthen his position by achieving notable feats, even minor ones.”

“That makes sense.”

Despite reaching that conclusion, Sieg and Bulat read through the document time and time again to ensure they had not overlooked any traps.

◇

A saint bird with a long tail that I had summoned came flying in through the open window. Mireille retrieved the rolled-up note attached to its foot and read it.

“Miss Ellie, this report concerns you-know-what,” she warned.

“I see. Could you please leave us for a moment?” I asked the branch employees.

“Of course.”

“Please excuse us.”

The branch employees who were working alongside me left the room. I exchanged a look with Misha, and she went to stand by the door, pricking up her ears. She listened attentively to see if any of them had remained by the door to listen in on us. Evading her acute beastkin senses was unlikely. In the meantime, Lunoa closed the window, which had remained open until now. She then closed the curtains.

Only Mireille, Lunoa, Misha, Alice, and I remained in the room. The little girl sat at a small desk we’d added to the room for her, quietly reading a picture book.

I had only shared my plan to deal with the counterfeit money issue with a handful of people. After Misha made sure that everything was fine, she nodded.

“This is a message from Maverick from the Elisabeth Commercial Firm,” Mireille started. “He’s successfully contacted Funnel’s current representative, Colt Lampton.”

“Did they sign a contract?” I asked.

“Not yet. Maverick has only seen him once so far. He explained Elisabeth’s stance and said he expects negotiations to start soon.”

“All right. Tell Maverick to get the job done no matter what. Money is not a concern so he may use as much as needed.”

“I shall do just that.”

Now that we knew its content, Mireille handed me the note so I could burn it on the spot, leaving nothing behind.

“Have we received word from Lord Lucas yet?” I asked.

“No, but considering the timing of the party, I believe a message should arrive today,” Mireille said.

Right at that moment, something knocked on the window. Lunoa opened it, and the saint bird I’d left with Lucas flew in.

“Speak of the devil,” I said. “This is from Lord Lucas, right?”

Mireille retrieved the note and nodded. “He succeeded. The treaty has been signed.”

“The first step has been completed.”

“Indeed. For the time being, things are progressing as expected. As long as they do not have an information expert, they won’t realize anything until it’s too late.”

◆

“I’ve got interesting news for you,” said Barl, entering Colt’s office without bothering to knock. He picked up one of the bottles on Colt’s desk and drank straight from it.

“About Maverick and Elisabeth?” asked Colt.

“Yeah. That firm’s fishy. It recently opened a store in an ideal location in the royal capital of Mellina and has been conducting business on a large scale. The weird thing is that there’s no trace of it doing anything before that. The company appeared out of nowhere but has snowballed using seemingly endless funds. There’s gotta be a big fish backing it. It mostly deals with cosmetics and perfumes, and no one’s ever seen their supposed chair, Elisabeth. Even that Maverick guy is off, recently hired to negotiate a deal with Funnel.”

“Sounds suspicious indeed.”

“Right? I tried to figure out his background but couldn’t find anything. It’s like the guy appeared out of thin air. Anyway, it sure looks like he’s out to trick you.”

“I should refuse any further dealings, then…”

Just as Colt reached this conclusion, his secretary called from outside the door.

“Lord Colt, Belit from the Biot Commercial Firm is here for you.”

The merchant he had an appointment with today had just arrived.

“Have him wait in the parlor,” replied Colt, turning to Barl again. “What about that Belit, Barl? What kind of man is he?”

His doubts regarding the Elisabeth Commercial Firm had made him cautious, so he had Barl look into Belit before they met for the first time. Barl reluctantly stopped drinking to answer.

“Belit from Biot, huh? Biot’s headquarters are in the Kingdom of Mellina. Unlike Elisabeth, it has a long history. He’s the son of the current chair—the third since the creation of the firm. He’ll probably take over when his old man dies or retires. Biot’s performance has been lackluster these days, but there doesn’t seem to be anything weird ’bout it.”

After listening to Barl’s assessment, Colt nodded and stood up, eady to see his guest.

“It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, I’m Belit from the Biot Commercial Firm.”

“I’m Colt from Funnel. Sorry, but my schedule’s packed today. Can you make this quick?”

“Of course. As you must have guessed, I came here hoping to strike a deal with your firm, but…” Belit trailed off.

Colt frowned at the man's evasiveness, then insisted, "What is it? Speak."

"Well, I heard that the Elisabeth Commercial Firm recently contacted you..."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

The mention of the suspicious company put Colt on his guard.

"We've looked into the Elisabeth Commercial Firm, and it appears to be a dummy company created for the sole purpose of destroying Funnel."

Colt remained silent.

"I have a proposal for you," Belit continued. "What would you say about teaming up with us to destroy Elisabeth instead?"

"I'm going to need more details."

"I will be honest with you. Elisabeth is causing us a lot of trouble, and we deeply resent them. That firm suddenly appeared out of the blue and has been throwing money at people to secure deals, acting like they own the entire market in Mellina. Despite all this, they never seem to run out of funding. We suspect that they're receiving support from a high-ranking individual," explained Belit. "Your firm seems to be Elisabeth's goal, so we want to team up with you and make them pay. Together, we can suck their funding dry."

Colt hummed.

That made sense. The Elisabeth Commercial Fund had gone too far and began attracting enemies in the Kingdom of Mellina. Colt wasn't surprised. Based on what Barl had told him and his own observations, Maverick seemed to be a good actor but a terrible merchant.

"Do you have a plan already?" Colt asked.

"I wouldn't have approached you if we didn't. First, you would need to make a deal with Elisabeth to fool them, then..."

After Belit explained his plan in detail, Colt shook his hand. If everything went well and he siphoned off Elisabeth's funding, he'd have a real chance of putting Funnel back on track.

◇

I was sitting in my room after a day of work and enjoying a cup of coffee when a saint bird flew in, carrying another report for me. It was from Maverick and, after Mireille read from it to inform me of its content.

"Miss Ellie, we've secured a deal with Funnel," she said.

He'd signed a contract with Funnel as planned.

"Victory is in sight," I replied.

"As per your orders, I'll tell Maverick to allow Funnel to profit for the time being."

"Thank you. Also, let the others know that we will act in two months. I shall also make my move then. Any news from the royal capital?"

"Nothing of note. We've finally had manservants and maids infiltrate the palace so the information we receive has grown more accurate. However, we still have no means of listening in on the influential figures of the government. I cannot be entirely sure they aren't planning anything."

"That's fine. Colt's father is Marquess Lampton, that treacherous minister of finance. He receives continuous reports on the tariffs between the empire and the kingdom and every large-scale transaction. There is no way he missed the peculiar exchange increase in recent months. He must be keeping an eye on what his son is doing."

"And is making sure none of it reaches the ears of others," Mireille finished for me.

"Exactly. I assume Marquess Lampton must have taken some precautions but they're of little concern to us. If this plan succeeds,

that sly fox will be out of my way for good."

◆

"Heh heh heh! These past two months have been good! The Elisabeth Commercial Firm made me rich!"

"You laugh like a villain, boss. So? What made you so happy?" inquired Barl.

"Ha ha! That Maverick is truly a fool! He's trying to set me up and is desperate to earn my trust, so he keeps bringing me the most advantageous deals I've ever seen. I've only paid them with fake coins. Thanks to Belit arranging for an appraiser from Mellina to pretend that they're real, Maverick doesn't have the slightest idea!"

Because of Colt's tremendous profits, Funnel was doing better than ever. The firm had been in a difficult position mere months prior but had completely recovered.

"Maverick asked me to help him find a good place for Elisabeth to set up a shop in Haldoria, so I suggested my father's territory. I overcharged him for the land *and* put them in a place that was easy to monitor. Maverick is so convinced that I trust him that he happily paid! And this is the cherry on top."

Colt threw a letter Maverick had written him atop his desk.

"He wants to make yet another deal with me, so he's asking me to visit him in the Lampton Marquisate. According to him, this will be our biggest deal to date, which can't even compare to the previous ones. Sounds shady, don't you think?"

A savage smile appeared on Barl's face.

"Sounds fun, if you ask me. I got a hold of some more information too. I know who's behind Elisabeth. It's Ellie Leis, the chair of the Traitre Commercial Firm, a company based in the empire. She's a young woman who's just gotten a Special Licence and is quite the fierce girl. She led an army and fought in person in the recent conflict to protect her business interests."

“Interesting,” Colt replied. “What does she look like?”

“No idea. She’s pretty good at concealing her tracks. I bought that piece of info from my buddies in the empire, but she seems to be connected with Darc Hokins, the man who controls the empire’s underworld. My buddies all said that they couldn’t tell me more than that.”

“If a merchant from the empire is behind Elisabeth, her goal must not be to take over the counterfeit money production. Spreading fake coins from your own country is too risky. She might try to use the fake coins to absorb Funnel itself.”

“What are you gonna do?” asked Barl.

“I’m going, obviously.”

Colt’s lips warped into a smirk.

Barl grinned and asked, “Are you sure? This is obviously a trap.”

“Why do you think I pay you? If that girl gets weird ideas, you’ll put her back in her place. Or were you going to let a little girl beat your ass?”

“Who do you think you’re talking to? I’ll kill her and anyone else who attacks you for that matter. As long as I receive my coins, that is.”

“I’ll bring some guards along, just in case. But well, I’m sure I won’t need them with you by my side.”

A few days later, Colt brought Barl to Elisabeth’s store in the Lampton Marquisate. The pair quickly followed Maverick’s subordinates to a warehouse outside of town. There was nothing around it save for a couple of buildings belonging to the Elisabeth Commercial Firm. Beyond that was a forest. Upon being shown inside, Colt and Barl were asked to wait in a small parlor.

While they waited alone, the two couldn’t help but snicker.

“How stupid can they get?” Colt let out. “Bringing us to an isolated place like this makes it so obvious they’re about to attack us. They might as well have told us directly.”

“Isn’t it fine? It’s straightforward, I like that.”

“I suppose so.”

“I guess they did that so there would be no witnesses, even if they go a bit crazy,” joked Barl.

“The same goes for our side, though.”

A soft knocking sound interrupted their conversation. Once Colt told the person to enter, Maverick stepped in with an insincere smile.

“I’m terribly sorry for the wait, Lord Colt,” said Maverick, rubbing his hands together.

“It’s no problem,” replied Colt, making himself sound as easygoing as possible.

“Well then, shall we move on to business?” Maverick asked.

“There’s something else I’d like to do first.”

“What is it?”

“Introduce you to someone.”

“Introduce me? To whom?”

“Come in.”

At Colt’s request, another man came in.

“You!” Maverick exclaimed.

“It’s been a while, Mr. Maverick,” said the man

“B-Belit! Wh-What are you doing here?”

Colt had so much fun watching Maverick lose his cool. He felt as if he was watching a comedy unfold and couldn't hold back his laughter.

"Don't be so surprised. Mr. Belit just shared a couple of his discoveries with me. You know, like how you were trying to set Funnel up."

"Th-Those... Those are groundless accusations! I-I would never __"

"Is that so? Care to explain why the guards I brought along in secret caught several armed men around this building?"

"I... I know! They must be thieves! Thieves aiming to steal our goods!"

"Is that so?" remarked Colt in a mocking tone.

Like a predator torturing its wounded prey before delivering the final blow, Colt enjoyed watching Maverick squirm. His sadism had taken over, forcing Maverick to look away from the cruel gaze.

Maverick tried to calm down and continued, "Y-You have to believe me, Lord Colt. We never harbored such intentions toward you! O-Our owner is even here especially to meet you today!"

Colt hummed. "So Miss Elisabeth made the trip just for me?"

"N-No... I'm talking about our owner, nor our chair."

"Your owner?"

"Indeed! Our chair, Miss Elisabeth, was also hired by our owner..."

"It must be Ellie Leis from Traitre, then."

"H-How do you know that?!"

Maverick was aghast. Yet Colt was quite happy with the effect his words had on the poor man and happily answered.

“Did you truly think I wouldn’t see through your little plan? I’ve known all along that a merchant from the empire was backing you up. You were about to invite your dear owner in, weren’t you? Go on. Gett her! Bring Ellie Leis to me!”

Then, Maverick scurried out of the room.

“You sure you wanted to let him run off, boss? He’s probably coming back with a bunch of mercenaries.”

“If he does, we can just defeat them.”

Colt had over a hundred men waiting outside the building. while Belit had brought around fifteen of his men. They should have already dealt with most of Elisabeth’s armed forces. Besides, Colt had Barl as well as six talented fighters he’d disguised as employees with him. According to Barl, Ellie Leis didn’t hesitate to get her hands dirty in a fight but she was just a merchant. He had researched her achievements during the conflict and discovered that a troop of elite adventurers and mercenaries constantly followed her, carrying out most of the work. Ellie was, at best, at the level of a Rank B adventurer. She couldn’t hold a candle to someone like Barl, who could easily defeat Rank A Divine Artifact users. Colt’s behavior betrayed his confidence, showing an air of arrogance on his face, although no one questioned it.

“Excuse me,” said Maverick as the door opened. “I’m sorry for the wait.”

“Let’s see how many mercenaries you’ve— Huh?”

At that moment, Colt was so convinced that mercenaries would rush in when Maverick entered that he stared at him in confusion. Maverick had only brought two people with him—two women. One had beautiful silver hair cascading down to her lower back. She did not seem to mind the tense atmosphere one bit and quietly sat in front of Colt while the other woman, a maid based on her outfit, stood behind her. The silver-haired woman wore a smile on her lips as if she thought the situation was amusing. When her eyes fell on Colt, he could read their disdain.

Not only had a beautiful woman and her maid appeared instead of the bloodthirsty fighters he'd expected, but she even seemed to enjoy herself. While that was shocking enough on its own, that wasn't what had Colt astonished.

"Nice to meet you, Lord Colt, Funnel's chair."

This wasn't their first meeting, far from it. Colt knew her. The lady before him was none other than Friede's previous fiancée, a prodigy of noble birth, the very person who'd created Funnel, and a criminal wanted for high treason...

"I'm Ellie Leis, the owner of the Elisabeth Commercial Firm."

...Elizabeth Leiston.

Colt tried to speak but the words wouldn't come out.

Some stupid upstart from the empire should have been behind the Elisabeth Commercial Firm, not Elizabeth Leiston! How could he have expected that?!

"Is something wrong, Lord Colt?" wondered Elizabeth.

Colt was visibly shaken. His composure and arrogance from a moment earlier had disappeared entirely as he started to panic. What was he supposed to do? She was dangerous, and he knew it. Elizabeth had received the education of a crown princess—worse, of a queen! In Haldoria, queens had to be proficient in magic and martial arts to protect their king if the situation called for it. In other words, queens were stronger than royal guards!

Elizabeth's overwhelming aura made Colt tremble, making him unable to think properly anymore. No matter of hard he tried, his brain wouldn't cooperate. The silence stretched out between them, and Colt grew even more scared. Elizabeth could take his life at any point if she so desired.

"I-It has been far too long, Lady Elizabeth."

"Far too long, indeed," she replied.

Her smile was like a blossoming flower. She seemed truly happy to reunite with Colt despite the circumstances. But Elizabeth's following words rid Colt of that idea.

"I heard that dirty insects had infected my firm in my absence, so I came to take a look." Her gaze changed as she spoke, and she looked down at Colt like he was a piece of trash on the ground.

"P-Please don't jump to conclusions, my lady. I... I was only protecting Funnel for you!"

"Is that so?"

"Y-Yes. I couldn't stop His Highness's tyranny, but I strived to keep Funnel alive for your sake! It's thanks to me the firm is still standing!"

"And?"

Colt realized that none of what he'd said had made a favorable impression on her, so he mustered up his courage and stared back.

"Lady Elizabeth," he started. "You're wanted for high treason."

"I am."

"M-My father is one of His Majesty's favorite ministers. I could mediate for you to negotiate with His Majesty."

"No need."

Elizabeth only gave short responses, yet every word she uttered put more pressure on Colt. He felt like he was about to pass out from stress and fear. For better or worse, he did not.

Suddenly, the door opened, and someone Colt had never seen entered the room.

"Excuse me," said the young catkin girl, who was pretty and wore nice, tidy clothes. "Miss Ellie. I took care of the men who were lying in wait."

“Good job,” Elizabeth praised.

“I captured the ones that appeared to be commanders as well as ten soldiers alive and killed the rest. I left the prisoners in the care of Mr. Belit’s soldiers for now.”

“What?!” Colt rose to his feet and glared at Belit.

Belit pointed at Elizabeth with a wry smile and said, “I do apologize for the late introduction. Please meet Biot’s owner, Miss Ellie Leis.”

“Y-You… From the start…”

Had Belit been on Elizabeth’s side from the very start?

“That’s impossible…” faltered Colt. “Biot has a long history and __”

“You sure are a poor merchant,” Ellie said.

“Wh-What?!”

“I purchased Biot, including its long history. That is all.”

“You bought an established firm *and* created a shady dummy company just to trick me?! Why would you do something like that? I exchanged mountains of gold with you to suck Elisabeth’s funds dry, but they were all fake coins! There’s no way you of, all people, haven’t noticed. So why waste so much effort and money gathering fake coins?! What’s the point?”

“Let me tell you something,” Elizabeth said. “At this very moment, Count Lebrick and his knights are taking over your counterfeit money workshop.”

“That’s impossible!”

Count Lebrick was the empire’s ambassador in Haldoria and a foreign noble.

“We are in the Lampton Marquisate,” exclaimed Colt. “An

imperial noble cannot bring an army here!”

“My, aren’t you aware?” asked Elizabeth in an innocent tone.

The maid standing behind Elizabeth set documents on the table, pushing them toward Colt. He looked down and started reading.

“Wh-What in the world...”

“Done reading?” added Elizabeth. “The empire and the kingdom entered a new commercial treaty a few months ago. An additional treaty, which most countries on the Central Continent have signed at one point or another, accompanied it. Needless to say, that treaty has a clause on counterfeit money. Should the country whose currency was forged find fake coins, it reserves the right to investigate without delay and arrest the culprit, even if they are on foreign soil. This isn’t anything novel; most treaties include this clause for protection.”

“N-No way... But I haven’t heard anything...”

“Is that so? The treaty finally came into effect a few days ago. Any local Merchants’ Guild should have notified nearby firms.”

Colt had left the capital several days ago to travel to the marquisate. He had yet to hear about the new treaty on the way. Regardless, the signing of such a significant treaty between two powerful nations would have sparked rumors before its official announcement. If Colt had frequented the Merchants’ Guild regularly, he would have gotten a hold of this piece of information. Colt, however, had neglected to do so.

“I asked Count Lebrick to get Friede to sign that treaty. As soon as he let Haldoria grasp an advantage, Friede happily signed. Well, it may not last long, considering how we’re using it right now.”

“H-His Highness did what?!”

“Foolish, isn’t he? He was in the process of forging the empire’s currency. Yet, he happily gave away the right to investigate to the empire.”

“S-Since when? Since when have you been targeting me?”

“Oh, I’m not targeting you. Who would bother with a small fry like you? I can crush you at any time. Even if I leave you be, you’re no threat to me. I’m a busy woman, you know? So, I can’t waste my time worrying about every parvenu playing merchant.”

“I’m…a small fry? You can crush me anytime?” Colt parroted Elizabeth’s words, dumbfounded.

Elizabeth’s cold gaze was on him, and all he could read in her eyes was apathy. She truly did not care about him.

“Right after I noticed that counterfeit coins were appearing in the empire, my spies reported that you were producing them for Friede. I was quite surprised, but that gave me the perfect opportunity to set things straight with the firm I’d left behind…and dispose of the traitorous marquess who betrayed me. As for you, you shall become the trigger that sets everything in motion.”

“What do you mean…?”

“Once I crush you, Marquess Lampton will fall. I made sure of it.”

Colt turned pale. While he thought that his father was incompetent, he also feared him. He was afraid of what that man would do once he learned of this.

“No… No, no, no… I don’t have a choice anymore… Barl! Kill her!”

He had to fight back.

“Who cares if the king praised her swordplay or if she received some advanced education? None of that amounts to anything! She’s bluffing! At the end of the day, she’s just a girl! You’re from the underworld and will destroy her in no time!” screamed Colt.

He did not believe half of what he was saying and hoped to reassure himself as much as to convince Barl.

◇

Colt jumped to his feet and ordered the burly man next to him to murder me. The latter stepped forward, and his prior faint presence suddenly became oppressive.

“Guess that’s how it’s gonna go. What do you say, missy?” stated Barl, standing before Colt as if to protect him.

“Some things can’t be helped,” I said. The giant cracked his fingers, and I smiled at him. “I suppose this is as far as this goes. You may stop.”

“No worries. I’ll miss that job, though. It paid well.”

“I have many more missions I’d love to entrust to you. Regardless, I shall pay you handsomely.”

Barl shrugged and suddenly turned around, punching one of the guards in disguise Colt had brought with him. He flew and crashed into the wall, coughing up blood before he passed out. Then, he killed the rest of the guards before Colt could utter a word.

All the while, Colt gawked at Barl.

“Barl! Did you betray me?!”

“Wow, don’t make me sound like a villain,” the burly man replied. “I was only in the capital to gather intelligence for her. So, I was on her side from the start. I’m thankful to you, though. I got to send a few of my people into the palace through you. Oh, and you pay pretty well. Not as well as the missy does, but it’s still worth something, right?”

“Barl. Address Miss Ellie appropriately,” said Mireille.

“Sorry, sorry. You know I wasn’t raised proper, Mireille, don’t you?”

Seeing Barl chat so casually with Mirelle and me, Colt finally understood that he was alone, with no allies. Barl was one of the allies I’d left in the capital as a spy. Years ago, I’d saved him from

grim circumstances in the underworld years ago, and he'd been working for me from the shadow since then. He was a crude man but prudent and quick-witted—two essential qualities.

I ignored Colt and glanced at Misha, signaling to her it was time to move to the next step. She opened the door and called out to the people waiting outside. Three men came in: a noble of the robe who worked for Lucas as well as two knights.

"Wh-Who are they?"

"An official from the empire and two knights. They're here for you."

The knight swiftly moved behind Colt. They grabbed his arms and held him down.

"That can't be! No way! There's no way!" repeated Colt. "I'm a nobleman! You won't get away with—"

"Oh, but we will. This is a lawful arrest, Lord Colt," the official said. "Don't worry. Your friends will soon join you in the empire. Lord Lucas seized the documents related to the counterfeit money. With them and your testimony, the process shall be smooth."

"My...testimony?"

"Why, yes. Those who are in charge of torture... Oh, do excuse me. I meant to say that interrogators are quite talented in our empire. I'm sure you'll have much to say to them."

The meaning of his words dawned on Colt, and his face lost color. He shivered, his knees almost giving away, and tears welled up in his eyes.

"Don't," he pleaded. "I'll talk! I'll talk!"

"I'd be glad if you did," he replied. "But I won't decide if you've said enough. Don't look so worried, my lord. We have very competent healing mages. You'll be fine."

"No... I... Lady Elizabeth! Save me! I only did it because His

Highness ordered me to!”

“You seem to have much to say, Lord Colt,” I said. “But fear not, I’m sure the people of the empire will hear you out.”

“Colt Lampton, you are hereby under arrest for the crimes of having forged imperial coins and insulting the imperial family,” the official read from an official letter.

Colt let out a pathetic cry before the knights dragged him away.

The empire’s torture expert would undoubtedly listen to him very carefully. In the empire, minted gold coins featured the empire’s crest and the first emperor’s profile. Replicating these without permission was a grave offense that insulted the dignity of the imperial family. For quite some time, the empire had not caught anyone doing this. Colt would surely never make it out of the empire’s jail alive. They’d execute him in the cruelest way possible to set an example.

“We’re done here,” I said. “Let us go.”

After I sent Maverick and Belit away, Mireille and Misha followed me to the carriage so we could head to our next stop.

“Barl,” I said, calling out to the muscular man walking beside me.

“Yep?”

“Barl, stop speaking to Miss Ellie like this,” said Mireille immediately.

I let out a small laugh. “It’s quite all right, Mireille.”

She unhappily backed down.

“There’s something else I’d like you to do before you leave for the empire,” I told Barl, handing him several documents.

◇

“Hi. I’m glad you made it.”

“Lord Lucas,” I greeted him. “You shouldn’t have come out to welcome me.”

We arrived at the workshop the following day and immediately came upon Lucas. He was waiting outside while his men hurriedly brought documents and proof out of the building to bring back to the empire.

“I wanted you to see this,” he told me, handing me a piece of paper.

“This is…”

“The best ammunition you could ask for,” stated Lucas.

He’d just shown me direct proof that Friede had personally ordered the creation of counterfeit coins.

“Is this the real deal?”

“I can’t say for sure until we have a handwriting expert appraise it, but it seems to be. Let us have it appraised as soon as we get back to the empire.”

I couldn't believe Friede had left such decisive evidence behind. Again, I was in awe at his stupidity.

"You should hold on to this, Lord Lucas," I said. "Haldoria will never hand over its crown prince to the empire, even if there is clear evidence of his involvement. But you can request considerable indemnities to make up for that."

"Are you sure? There are other ways in which you could use it."

"Quite sure. Demanding tremendous sums of money and chipping off at the entire nation's strength will bring me closer to my objective than cornering Friede alone."

This matter was no interpersonal dispute. The crown prince of Haldoria had committed a grave crime against the empire. All this would evolve into a dispute between nations they could only settle by offering reparation. The sum would surely be enough to bring Haldoria to the brink of collapse.

"I see," Lucas said pensively. "In that case, I promise I'll use it well."

I returned the piece of paper back to Lucas, and our parties departed for the empire together. There were seven carriages in the convoy: Lucas's carriage, which Misha and I boarded; my carriage that Mireille drove; three used by the official and knights to bring back documents and all types of evidence; and two more used to transport Colt and the other suspects Lucas had apprehended.

"Still, this all went awfully well," murmured Lucas, looking over some of the documents he'd confiscated.

"Why, of course," I replied. "Funnel was mine, and the spy I left within fed me all the information I needed to make this happen."

The spy in question, Barl, was not traveling to the empire with us. He was to remain in the kingdom for a while longer to complete another job for me.

"Funnel is truly done for now," commented Lucas.

“Yes, it’ll be dissolved before long. Not that I mind since my people all left. Only the parasites that Friede tends to attract have remained.”

“I see,” he said. “What of Colt? The main culprit is a nobleman, is he not? What will happen to his house?”

“His father may attempt to cut ties with him, but he’ll still face demotion and lose his ministerial position. Since Friede was the true ringleader, I’m confident that the Lamptons will avoid receiving a death sentence.”

“Now that is unusually kind of you.”

“Lord Lucas… What do you take me for?”

I glared at Lucas, but he shrugged.

“In Robert’s case, dozens of citizens lost their lives, did they not? Yet this time, you seem content to simply arrest the culprits. To be perfectly honest, I figured a rain of blood would befall the kingdom this time too.”

“I’m not a monster, Lord Lucas,” I replied. “I have no qualms about involving the masses if I must, but I do not have a penchant for mindless slaughter. Besides, this entire affair is nothing but groundwork.”

“Groundwork?”

“I told you that my goal was to crush the kingdom. I’ve already taken the next step to that end.”

Lucas furrowed his brows and looked at me.

“As we’ve established, the king will not let Friede go, even if he’s proven guilty. However, he’ll have no choice but to hand over all the other nobles involved in this matter to the empire.”

“Indeed. We, in the empire, will not let him get away with anything less.”

“How do you think the aristocracy will feel?” I asked.

“Well... Some families will have to surrender members to the Empire and endure the disgrace of their peerage demotion because of something Friede ordered.”

“All the while, Friede, the ringleader, gets away scot-free,” I added.

“This spells discord between the aristocracy and the royal family.”

“Add to this the current crisis the kingdom faces with its vassal nations and the anti-noble sentiment the Robert incident evoked among the masses. At the root of each of these issues is a blunder Friede committed.”

At my words, Lucas averted his eyes.

“Surely, you don’t mean...”

“If one pours oil on the fire and fans the flames, there can only be one result,” I said.

I told Lucas what I had tasked Barl to do and his face dulled.

“There will be countless casualties... This cannot be compared to what happened with Robert,” he whispered.

“I never hid my intentions,” I replied. “If kill I must, kill I shall.”

“Allow me to retract my earlier statement...” said Lucas. “There is nothing kind about you. You’re terrifying.”

I watched him close his eyes and sigh deeply before telling him it was a bit late to point that out. Considering the status quo, Haldoria would be doomed when Friede sat on the throne. I was only speeding up that process.

“Have you heard about the recent craze in the imperial capital?” I asked Lucas, changing the topic.

I proceeded to tell him about my recent endeavors surrounding chocolates, and Lucas urged me to open a teahouse in his territory.

◆

Bulat sat in his office, greatly troubled.

Seven days ago, he suddenly received notice from the empire they'd send troops beyond the border to arrest people who fabricated counterfeit imperial coins. Four days ago, another message arrived, notifying him that noblemen were among the culprits. Ten minutes ago, his prime minister Sieg Leiston rushed to his office to inform him that the empire had identified the ring leader: it was none other than his son, Friede Haldoria. Finally, mere seconds ago, Roselia entered enraged, bearing a letter from the imperial authorities.

"Sieg," the king started. "Where is Friede?"

"I've already sent people to summon him here."

"All right. What does the empire have to say, Lady Roselia?"

"The empire demands that everyone involved is handed over, as well as an official apology and monetary compensation for the damage caused," she responded.

"I can't just send the crown prince to be judged in another country," Bulat said.

"You mustn't, Your Majesty," Sieg agreed. "Support toward the royal family would plummet."

"I, for one, would love to have him take responsibility for his foolish mistakes," Roselia said. "However, we'd be handing the empire a golden opportunity to march on Haldoria using His Highness as a puppet figurehead. He cannot be sent to the empire alive, no matter what."

"In other words..." Bulat trailed off.

"We will have no choice but to pay an exorbitant compensation."

"And that won't be all, will it?"

“No, Your Majesty,” Sieg replied. “The treaty His Highness signed will undergo revisions. We’ll be forced to accept unfavorable conditions.”

Bulat buried his face in his palms. “How about we just refuse?”

“We cannot do that,” declared Roselia sternly. “That would give them an excuse to disregard the truce and start a war. Doing so would have been fine a few years prior, but we cannot go to war with the empire now. While our relationships with our vassal countries are returning to normal, they’re still tense. If we focus our military on the empire, we may very well be stabbed in the back.”

“Your Majesty, regarding you-know-what…” Sieg approached the king and whispered something in his ear.

Bulat sighed deeply halfway through resignation and relief.

Roselia watched the two men interact, confused. She asked, “Is something the matter?”

“I should have told you about this earlier, Lady Roselia,” replied Bulat. “In fact—”

“Were you looking for me, father?” asked Friede casually as he entered the room.

He’d brought Sylvia with him, even though the king had not requested her presence. None of the people in the room had the energy to admonish him for it, though.

“How can you be so calm? You know full well what you’ve done, do you not?”

“What have I done?” retorted Friede, sitting down. His tone was just as casual.

“I’m talking about the counterfeit money.”

Friede froze.

“You’ve gone too far, Friede,” the king continued. “Even I cannot

protect you from the consequences this time. That is why I…" A pained expression took over Bulat's features. "I've made a decision."

"Father?"

A servant whispered something in Sieg's ear and the prime minister quickly relayed it to the king. Bulat nodded and said, "Come in."

The door opened, and two women walked in.

"What?!" screamed Friede, jumping to his feet and pushing the chair back. "What are *you* doing here?!"

The first young woman was a servant. Like most of the people on the Southern Continent, her hair and eyes were pitch-black.

The second woman was even younger. While her hair was black as that of the servant, her eyes were a vivid shade of green. Most of her features were similar to those of the people from the Central Continent, although her demeanor was that of a southerner. Her mixed parentage gave her a unique charm.

The young woman shrugged and echoed, "What am I doing here? Isn't that obvious? I was summoned."

"What?!"

Bulat ignored Friede and greeted the young woman who'd made the trip from the Southern Continent at his request.

"It has been a while, Adel. Sorry for calling upon you so suddenly."

"I don't mind. Long time no see, father." After replying to the king, she turned to the others and looked at each of their faces to greet them. " Brother, Sieg, Roselia."

Once finished, Adel Haldoria, the princess of the Kingdom of Haldoria, looked at Sylvia, sitting on the seat next to Friede, with a bored expression.

She tilted her head in confusion and asked, “Speaking of which... Where might Elizabeth be?”

Despite the topic being difficult to discuss for Sieg, he explained to Adel in detail what had happened. As she listened, displeasure took over her face. When he ended, she spoke up.

“Are you all stupid?”

Bulat did not react. His daughter was right, and he had no intention to argue with her. On the other hand, Friede clicked his tongue and crossed his arms.

“Brother, why in the world would you break your engagement with her?”

“Hmph. I had to after what she did to Sylvie,” he replied.

“Do you have proof?”

“Huh?”

“I’m asking if you have any proof that Elizabeth did something, anything at all, to harm that girl.”

“Sylvie told me so. That’s more than enough proof.”

“That’s not how these things work, is it?”

“Are you trying to imply that Sylvie lied?!”

“I’m not just *implying* it. I thought I was being clear.”

At Adel’s words, Sylvia stood up. “Wait, Lady Adel! I would nev __”

“Silence,” Adel ordered, her tone ice cold. “I do not recall allowing you to say my name or to address me at all, for that matter.”

“Adel! Sylvia is my fiancée! Who do you think you are to insult her?!”

“Who? A princess, that is who I am. This girl is your fiancée, brother, not your wife. As things stand, she’s a measly baron’s daughter, nothing more. How does she not even know that calling a higher-ranking individual’s name without having been invited to do so is rude?”

Sylvia curled up under Adel’s intense gaze.

“Anyhow,” Adel continued, changing the topic. “I have yet to hear why you called me back, father.”

“Well… Most of our current woes, including Elizabeth’s departure, are my fault. I wasn’t able to discipline Friede as I should have. Regardless, I have finally made up my mind.”

“What do you mean to say, father?!” exclaimed Friede, glaring at Bulat.

“Adel, I want you to become Fride’s aide.”

“You summoned Roselia and made her pick up Elizabeth’s slack. Yet now that it proved not to work out as well as you’d hoped, you’re discarding her and having me, the daughter you sent abroad so long ago, take over, is that it?” chastised Adel.

“No. Roselia did an admirable job,” Bulat said. “But there are some tasks only royalty can handle. Roselia will remain in the castle and work under you. As for you, Adel, while you’ll be Friede’s aide, you shall hold on to the authority of the crown prince in all but name.”

“What?!” Friede cried.

“Friede, I’ll be direct: consider yourself stripped of any authority that once belonged to you. You will get Adel’s approval before doing *anything*. Do I make myself clear?”

“That’s ridiculous!”

“This is my last mercy, Friede,” Bulat said. “Thunder magic users have always sat on Haldoria’s throne. That is the only reason you’re still the crown prince. However, Adel will be in charge of

everything, not you. If you make one more mistake, I shall forget about traditions and appoint Adel as the next queen."

Friede was dumbfounded.

Bulat ignored his son and turned to his daughter before adding, "That is what I have decided. You'll listen, won't you, Adel?"

Adel did not conceal her displeasure as she asked, "What does my newfound 'authority' entail exactly?"

"I hereby give you the right to issue one point five level commands."

"The privilege of the crown prince... What of my brother?"

"Friede will be allowed to issue fourth-level commands at most. Although for the time being, I do not want him giving out any orders at all."

Adel closed her eyes for a moment before nodding and eventually saying, "I understand, father. Roselia, I shall take over as soon as possible. Set up an office for me. I'll pick out my people myself."

"Wait! I never agreed to any of this!" shouted Friede.

"Brother, this is royal order. Neither you nor I have the right to refuse," conceded Adel. "I'll place someone to monitor you by your side as soon as I'm done choosing the members of my office. In the meantime, stay in your room."

"You're my younger sister, how dare you talk to me like that?!"

"Quiet, Friede. You *will* listen to Adel," Bulat ordered. "Sieg, get everything ready."

"At once, Your Majesty."

"Lady Roselia, I hope this new arrangement doesn't displease you. Please assist Adel to the best of your abilities."

“I will, Your Majesty.”

“If that is all, I shall take my leave,” stated Adel. “There is much to do to clean up the mess my dear brother left us with.”

Adel left, followed by her waiting maid and Roselia. But Friede remained in his father’s office, his face burning red from anger. Neither Bulat nor Sieg spoke another word. Eventually, Sieg ordered the guards to bring him and Sylvia, who seemed utterly shocked, back to Friede’s chamber.

◇◆☆◆◇

In a recently established workshop, a man held a small piece of paper. It depicted the likeness of an old man with a mustache and a beard. Anyone born in this country had learned about him in school. The person was Lucas Lebrick Haldoria, the first Archduke of the Dukedom of Haldoria.

The man looked at it, puzzled.

One of his colleagues walked by and asked, “What’s wrong?”

“I just can’t help but think that this is a bit weird,” the man replied. “Such a small piece of paper will be worth as much as a gold coin.”

“When you put it like that, I guess it is kinda weird.”

The piece of paper the man held was a note—a new form of money. From the following year onward, paper money would officially be introduced nationwide. This flimsy piece of paper seemed all but reliable for this man who’d only ever used coins made of precious metals such as gold or silver.

“What’s so good about these things?” he wondered aloud.

“The paper itself has no value,” his colleague started. “You can think of it as a coupon you can exchange for a gold coin anytime. It only has value *because* the government guarantees it does.”

“Not sure I get it. I’d much rather have a gold coin instead.”

His colleague laughed. “I guess most people will react like you at first. It’ll take time for these notes to be accepted and become commonplace. Sharp merchants will adopt them first, though.”

“You think so?” The man shrugged and once again studied the note. “So, the front has the first archduke, Lord Lucas, on it. But what are these symbols on the back?”

“Did you forget already? They explained it all to us when we started making them. Those are the seven books of the Silver Witch. And that flower is supposed to represent the first archduchess.”

“Ah, I see. They’re the crests of the important people of that time.”

“Something like that. Come on, break’s over. Let’s get back to work”

“Okay.”

The men began preparing for their afternoon work.

A scene at the New Currency Preparation Room of the Mint Bureau of the Dukedom of Haldoria.

Chapter 3: Lurking in the Entertainment District

“Miss Ellie, are you sure you don’t want to wear a dress?” asked Mireille.

“I am. I’m not going as a noble lady, after all.

The outfit I’d chosen was perfectly tailored and of fine quality, but it was not a dress. It was, in fact, gender-neutral and rather similar to men’s clothing.

Lunoa called for me, “Miss Ellie, it’s time to go.”

“I’m coming,” I said. *The carriage must be ready.*

I patted Alice’s head and followed Lunoa to the carriage. She sat in the driver’s box and started advancing toward the imperial palace we could see in the distance. When we reached the gate, the guards stopped us. Lunoa nervously showed them our invitation, and they let us through. A maid then led us to a drawing room. As soon as we stepped in, all eyes turned to me. Though Lunoa seemed more stressed than ever, I was perfectly at ease.

“How do you do, Lord Lucas, Mr. Calvin?” I greeted them, smiling

Lucas, Calvin—the guild master of the capital’s branch of the Merchants’ Guild—and their respective attendants were already in the room. Just like me, they’d been summoned today to be congratulated for their help in uncovering the culprit behind the counterfeit coins incident. Lucas and I had successfully apprehended the culprits in the kingdom. Meanwhile, Calvin had worked tirelessly to track down every last fake coin in the empire and make sure no more entered the country.

Considering my situation, I felt reluctant to receive praise in such a ceremonious way. Still, the emperor insisted saying that he’d lose face if I refused. I could see his point, as I’d been in the empire for

some time already and had even joined the dungeon dive on behalf of the crown not too long ago. So, I ultimately accepted his invitation.

My whereabouts had long been uncovered, so it didn't matter much. Speaking of which, it surprised me the kingdom had yet to make a move.

I was telling Lucas about Alice when a domestic walked in.

"Count Lebrick, Mr. Calvin, Miss Ellie, please follow me to the throne room."

We stopped our idle chat and followed the servant through the halls. Our group stopped in front of imposing doors that soon opened, allowing us entry into the throne room. Everyone walked along the red carpet and came to a halt a few meters away from the steps that led to the throne before prostrating. Lucas was kneeling in front while Calvin and I remained slightly behind, as was appropriate. Once we were in position, the emperor stepped into the room.

"Raise your heads."

Noblemen and ladies of the empire stood on each side of the room, and a minister read a list of our achievements. The emperor praised us and bestowed honorary knighthood for Calvin and me. Then came Lucas's turn.

"Lucas Lebrick," the emperor started. "You've served the empire remarkably. In light of your accomplishments, I hereby award you new land and bestow upon you the title of margrave."

"I humbly accept, Your Majesty."

The kingdom had been forced to pay hefty indemnities as well as cede land to the empire.

Not only did the empire ask for reimbursement for every fake coin found, but also for the money spent tracking them down. This was part of the reason I'd let the funds of my dummy company be sucked dry by Funnel. Because the final sum was so large that the

kingdom could not pay, it had had no choice but to offer land.

Lucas received part of that land as a reward. He had expanded his territory and had been promoted to margrave.

We spent half of the day at the palace, participating in the festivities.

◇

"Wow! Alice's already training to control her mana?"

"She's a fast learner too. She figured out how to suppress her mana in the blink of an eye."

While chatting, Tida and I sat on Grimoire's terrace and had the latest chocolate cake created by our chefs. I'd concealed that Alice had two magic attributes and pretended that I was teaching her how to control her mana because she had a lot of it. Speaking of Alice, she was at the next table with Lunoa and Misha. The latter was currently cleaning her face as she had chocolate all over.

"Amazing! If she can already control her mana at that age, she might just become an archmage," Tida commented.

"Heh heh," I let out. "She *is* quite the prodigy."

"I wouldn't have expected you to turn into this kind of bragging parent."

Even so, I glared at Tida in protest, and she quickly changed the topic, "So, Miss Ellie, are you going to remain in the capital so you can focus on Alice for a while?"

"I wish I could," I replied. "But I cannot afford to."

"What do you mean?"

"I have work to do. The production of aqua silk is well on track, so it is time to strike big deals. To do so, I'll have to leave the capital again."

“Where are you headed?”

“Kellevan.”

“Kellevan?!” exclaimed Tida.

The city of Kellevan, in Marquess Cobatt’s territory, was peculiar. It was more like a gigantic entertainment district than a regular city. On paper, Marquess Cobalt dispatched a local governor to administer the city. In reality, it was entirely under the control of one of the empire’s Merchants’ Guild Council member—Hilde Callard, the Silver Butterfly. The brothels and other such establishments she operated were already important clients of Traite. I intended to go to Hilde’s stronghold to promote our newest product, aqua silk, for this upcoming trip.

“Y-Y-You said Kellevan, right?” repeated Tida, getting up so quickly that her chair almost toppled backward.

She brought her face close to mine, her eyes gleaming.

“You’re too close!” I complained.

I tried to push her face away, but she wouldn’t budge.

“The place with the largest entertainment district in the empire, a gigantic casino, and all the best alcohol on the continent! That Kellevan, right?!”

“Y-Yes.”

Tida soon had a serious expression and dropped her voice, whispering, “I’m coming with you.”

“I’m not going there to have fun, you know?”

“Come on!” whined Tida, walking around the table to stand beside me and clutching to me. “You’ll take breaks here and there, won’t you? Take me along! I won’t bother you, I promiiiise!”

“Stop sticking so close to me. I don’t mind you coming, but... Aren’t you supposed to be a clergywoman? Should you really go to

an entertainment district?"

"Oh, I'm taking a break," she said. "God said 'Let loose, child.'"

"You'll incur God's wrath one of these days."

A few days later, Tida joined us as we were about to depart for Kellevan to conduct business.

◆

"Goodness gracious, Your Highness! I heard all about what happened. What misfortune!"

Friede clicked his tongue and asked, "Are you here to mock me?" He glared at the stout man who just sat before him. The man's holy robe was stretched to its upper limit, struggling to contain the man's plump body.

"You're being too harsh, Your Highness. I came to cheer up a dear friend in a time of trouble, that is all."

As Dondor laughed, the excess fat on his cheeks shook. The man wore a golden seal around his neck, proof that he was the archbishop of the Church of Ibris. Dondor traveled frequently, visiting churches and sacred sites to act as a liaison between the clergymen who officiated there and the main church.

"Good, you've done that. You can scram now," Friede said coldly.

"You don't seem to be in the best of moods today, Your Highness," said Dondor, laughing. "I shall take my leave, then."

The holy man stood up and made to leave, but Friede stopped him.

"Wait," he let out, irritation thick in his voice. "Leave what you came to give me here."

"What I came to give you? What in the world might you be referring to, Your Highness?"

“I’m talking about the money, you idiot! Give it to me!”

“The money? What money?”

“You’re being dense on purpose, aren’t you?! I help whenever you need to cross the border, don’t I?”

“Your Highness... It would be far more accurate to say that you *used* to help out.”

“Huh?!”

“You do not have the power to give orders to the soldiers of the border anymore, do you?”

Friede paused before answering, “Is that how you want to play it? I could have your cargo investigated at any time.”

Dondor laughed. “You ought to learn the ways of the world, Your Highness. If you did such a thing, our dealings thus far would also come to light. I’ve kept proof of you accepting my bribes.”

“What?!”

“You meddled with the empire with the money I gave you, did you not? I’ve heard that several noblemen faced punishment as a result. Their families must resent you, Your Highness. What would happen if everyone learned that the money you used was obtained through improper means on top of everything? Those incriminated and their families would face additional sanctions. I can only assume they’d come to hate you more in turn. We share the same lot, Your Highness. I suggest you discard your unsightly greed and live out your days quietly as your sister’s puppet,” the archbishop said, looking down on the prince with disdain. “Well, then.”

He left the room.

“Vile priest!” cursed Friede, hurling a teacup at the door Dondor had just left through, whichshattered noisily.

“Damn it! Why?! Why did things end up this way?! With Elizabeth out of my way, I should have been on top! I should have

indulged in luxury every day, with my lovely Sylvia by my side! Yet my father and the prime minister discipline me for the smallest mistakes while that impertinent wench, Roselia, rejects my superior military strategies because stupid international laws! To make things worse, the daughter of that dirty foreign whore dares order me to take responsibility! I'm a prince! The crown prince! I won't allow such disrespect!"

◇

The day of departure had come, and everyone gathered in front of my residence, ready to board the carriage. Mireille, Lunoa, Misha, and Alice would accompany me, as always. Our party did have an additional this time: Tida.

Misha sat in the driver's box and we departed. She led the carriage through the gates of the imperial capital and set out on the path toward the Cobatt Marquessate.

Marquess Cobatt's territory was directly adjacent to the land under the emperor's direct control. As a result, both imperial soldiers and Cobbat's knights protected the large road that connected it to the capital from monsters and brigands, making it relatively safe.

We were not in a hurry, and there were no dangers ahead. And so we took regular breaks, stopping to allow Alice to pick up the flowers she liked and admire the beautiful sceneries.

"Mama! This way!"

"Yes, yes, I'm coming."

I chased Alice as she ran around, laughing. Initially, I tried fixing her hem, but she'd decided we were playing tag. One should never underestimate children, particularly those who could use magic.

Thanks to our regular training sessions, Alice's physical abilities had evolved far beyond those of a regular girl her age. She could not reinforce her body with magic or skills yet, but it had gotten to the point where running after her was incredibly tiring unless I used

mana.

The two of us played together until Alice was satisfied before returning to the carriage and continuing our journey.

“Mama, what’s that?”

“This is a drake carriage,” I told her. “It’s almost the same as a regular carriage but pulled by the monsters you see there called swift drakes. They’re faster than horses but can’t run for as long.”

“Have you ever been in one, mama?”

“I’ve never boarded a drake carriage, but I have ridden a swift drake.”

“I wanna do that too!”

“Ride a swift drake?”

“Yes!”

I hadn’t expected her to be so interested in drakes. While swift drakes were the weakest dragons there were, they still looked intimidating. If they did not scare her and truly wanted to try riding one, I’d let her, even though that was worrying. Drakes were temperamental, so they were far from being the easiest monsters to ride. Having good synergy with them was crucial.

“Riding a swift drake is a little difficult, so how about we start with a round turtle?”

Alice had never seen one, yet she happily agreed.

“I wanna ride that too!”

It seemed like she was fine with anything.

Round turtles giant monsters that were quite meek and obedient despite being so strong. Street performers sometimes brought them to public squares and let children ride them as part of their performances.

“I’ll you ride one next time,” I said.

“It’s a promise!” beamed Alice.

As we kept chatting and I answered more of Alice’s questions, I found myself making more and more promises.

It was past noon on the third day of our journey. I was driving the carriage with Alice next to me in the driver’s box when we encountered a group of people blocking off the road.

“Mama, there are people there!”

“Don’t worry, Alice.”

From afar, I could see the flag that these people were carrying, which bore the crest of the Church of Ibris. They most likely were holy knights. I’d heard that a suspicious individual had been sighted in the area, so I assumed that the knights were there to investigate it.

As I explained the situation to Alice, Tida poked her head out of the carriage and squealed.

“What’s wrong Tida?”

“Th-They’re from the Fourth Division of Holy Knights,” she stammered.

“The Fourth Division? They’re in charge of handling criminals, are they not?”

“Th-They are. Hmm, Miss Ellie... If they ask, I’m Tida, a perfectly average employee of Traitre. Nothing more.”

Tida switched up her hairdo in a hurry and pulled her veil lower to hide part of her face. Then she sat in the corner of the carriage, trying to be as inconspicuous as possible.

“What did you do?” I asked. “You’re probably better off turning yourself in.”

“N-Nothing much! I may or may not have borrowed some wine and dried meat from the holy knights’ storehouse. That’s it!”

“That is called theft,” clarified Mireille.

“I already apologized! The commander of the holy knights chewed me out and forced me to kneel in front of a divine statue for five hours while copying scriptures!”

Tida shivered at the memory, tears welling up in her eyes. The holy knights didn’t seem to be her cup of tea.

“Halt!” exclaimed a holy knight as we got close.

I obliged, reckoning I’d do the talking as our representative.

“Forgive me for stopping you so suddenly,” the young knight said. “We’re the Sixth Squad of the Fourth Division of Holy Knights. We’re investigating an incident, so I must ask you to cooperate.”

After telling me that, he asked who we were.

“I’m Ellie Leis, the chair of the Traitre Commercial Firm,” I introduced myself. “This is Alice, my adopted daughter, and inside the carriage are my employees Mireille and Lunoa, my slave Misha, as well as Tida, my...friend.”

The man looked at them one by one and, when he reached Tida, he asked, “Can you even see in front of you?”

Tida had pulled her veil down so much that it covered half of her face. She couldn’t have looked any more suspicious if she’d tried.

“I-I get motion sickness,” she said, trying to change her voice.

“I see,” said the knight before turning back to me. “Why are you traveling through this path?”

“We’re headed to Kellevan for business,” I replied.

“All right. May I check your carriage, just in case?”

“Of course, please do.”

The Church of Ibris had the right to conduct investigations in many countries. However, they had no authority to enforce searches without people’s consent. Although I could have refused, I figured it would only make us look suspicious. I did not appreciate being treated like a suspect when I’d done nothing wrong, but I didn’t want him to get the wrong idea if I complained. Letting him check whatever he wanted was for the best.

After the holy knights searched our carriage and belongings, they concluded that everything was fine.

“Sorry for the trouble,” the man said.

“It’s no problem,” I replied. “I hope you solve this case as soon as possible.”

“Thank you. May God’s blessing be with you,” he said.

He placed his hands in front of his chest and prayed for our safety during our travels. We then bid him and the rest of the knights farewell and resumed our journey.

“Phew! We finally got away!” shouted Tida.

“I was never worried,” Mireille said. “We’ve done nothing wrong, so I knew we’d be fine if we acted normally.”

“Only *you* were nervous, Tida,” I agreed.

“Is Big Sister Tida a bad person?” inquired Alice.

“What? Of course I’m not a bad person, Alice! I just don’t get along with the holy knights very well.”

A few more days passed without any notable incidents until a city protected by large defensive walls came into view. Carriages lined up before the gates, waiting for their turn to enter Kellevan.

“Oh! We can see the city!”

“Big Sister Tida! It’s dangerous to poke your head through the window,” Alice warned Tida.

“Ah, you’re right…”

We took our place at the end of the line and waited. The queue was moving up fairly fast, and before long, it was our turn. I showed the sentries our identification papers, and we entered the city. We continued along the main street in search of accommodation. Upon finding an inn, we booked two double rooms, one for Alice and me and the other for Misha and Lunoa. We also got to two single rooms: one for Mireille and one for Tida. After leaving our luggage in our rooms, we gathered in the restaurant, where we ate and discussed our plans.

“I shall deliver a letter to Miss Callard to request a meeting as soon as is convenient for her.”

“Please do, Mireille.”

With Mireille handling that part, I had nothing to do until Hilde set up a meeting time, making me wonder how to pass the time. I would have done some sightseeing in a regular city, but Kellevan was not exactly brimming with tourist spots. Or rather, those places were inappropriate for Alice, Lunoa, and Misha.

Well, it wasn’t as though every establishment was indecent. The entertainment district made up most of the city’s center. Still, the outer districts bordering the city walls were home to regular restaurants, shops that sold goods for adventurers, and guild offices. I supposed heading to that part of town tomorrow and doing some market research would do.

“I’m thinking of walking around and looking at the shops tomorrow. What would you like to do?” I asked the others.

“I wanna go with mama!” effused Alice.

“I’d like to accompany you too!”

“Me too, Miss Ellie!”

Alice, Lunoa, and Misha would stay with me just as I'd expected.

"I will focus on coordinating your schedule for the rest of the trip," Mireille said.

Mireille would make appointments and take care of a few errands.

"I—"

"Oh, I don't need to know, Tida," I cut her off.

"Hey! You could at least hear me out!"

Her plans were fairly easy to guess. She'd head to the casino—or perhaps to a tavern.

"Don't overdo it," I warned her.

"I know! Don't worry. I won't cause any trouble for you."

The trip ired us, so we retired to our respective rooms after the meal. Alice was so excited that she didn't want to go to bed, but the exhaustion caught up with her, and she suddenly fell asleep.

I don't understand children, I thought as I tucked her in bed and reflected on my childhood. An etiquette teacher observed me day and night when I took crown princess lessons. But did not seem like a good point of comparison to further my understanding of children.

The following morning, we ate a simple breakfast at the inn, then Alice, Lunoa, Misha, and I left to explore the outer districts. Mireille remained at the inn for the time being. As for Tida, she'd headed out early that morning.

"Hold out your hands," I said.

When they did, I gave each of them a small bag containing ten small silver coins. It was a rather large sum for pocket money, but I wanted them to get used to spending money.

“This is for you to spend while we’re in Kellevan. Buy anything you like.”

“Thank you!”

“Thank you, Miss Ellie.”

“Thanks, mama.”

Even as she thanked me, Alice looked a little confused. She didn’t quite understand how money worked yet. I’d already taught her the basics, she had never bought anything. This would a good opportunity to teach her.

As we visited shops, I couldn’t help but check the quality and price of items. That reflex came with the job, I suppose.

Oh my, am I turning into a workaholic?

The girls were happily looking at accessories when Alice called for me.

“Mamaaa!” She came running to me.

“How cute,” I said, seeing the lace ribbons she’d tied into her glossy golden hair.

I noticed that Lunoa wore similar ribbons at the bottom of her braids while Misha had one tied around her tail.

“How do we look, Miss Ellie?” asked Lunoa. “We bought matching ribbons.”

“My hair is too short to use ribbons, so I put it around my tail,” added Misha.

“They suit the three of you very much,” I said.

As I watched them happily glance at each other’s ribbons, my lips curled into a smile.

We continued our shopping and walked through the city. Lunoa spent much time looking for a gift for her parents while Misha considered daggers at a weapon shop catering to adventurers with a serious expression. Later, Lunoa even bargained with a street vendor to buy Alice a wooden doll.

As the sun started setting, we returned to the inn. Alice followed Lunoa and Misha to their room, and I went to find Mireille to discuss business.

“Welcome back,” she greeted.

“Good evening. How did things go?”

“She will meet you in three days, after lunchtime.”

“That’s faster than I thought.”

“Yes. I also assumed I couldn’t secure an appointment before next week.”

“I’ll prepare for my meeting with Miss Callard the day after tomorrow, so that leaves tomorrow free.” I paused for a moment, thinking. “We shall head back to the shopping district tomorrow. You should also come, Mireille. The market was much larger than I thought, and there is much to see.”

“That sounds interesting.”

“I saw a few things you’ll definitely enjoy,” I told her.

The two of us continued chatting until Lunoa and Misha brought Alice, who’d started nodding off, back.

The next day, we left the inn just past noon. Mireille accompanied us to the market this time and walked around with us. Kellevan was famous for its entertainment industry, and many luxury goods were on sale. Mireille stopped in front of one of the shops that sold imported accessories.

“Was this tea set made in the country beyond the desert bordering the wild land of the east?” she asked, looking intently at the utensils.

“Indeed. Unlike the elegant white cups made in the empire and

the kingdom, the cups of that country are small and round. Detailed paintings of vividly colored flowers and birds often adorn them."

Mireille didn't express her feelings easily, but a faint smile appeared on her face. She loved to collect tea and coffee cups. Unlike most nobles focused on acquiring every expensive cup, she approached her collection differently. She simply enjoyed purchasing tea sets and cups that suited her tastes in markets and other unassuming shops.

"I'm sorry we had to leave your collection in the kingdom," I said.

Following me to the empire had cost Mireille her beloved collection of cups she had assembled over the years.

"Please don't apologize, miss," she said. "I've saved up a decent amount of money, so I can just start a collection anew."

I paid Mireille based on her hard work. However, she never used any of it except to buy cups from time to time.

After Mireille pondered the matter, she purchased the tea set from beyond the desert. Her face returned to being as expressionless as always, but I could tell she was overjoyed as someone who'd been by her side for a long time.

I called Alice, Lunoa, and Misha back so the five of us could head toward a restaurant the shop owner had just recommended for an early dinner.

"Miss Ellie... I don't think I—"

Misha hesitated and tried to turn back, though I took her hand and pulled her along without letting her finish her sentence.

"Don't worry about it. Come on, let us go in."

She'd stopped behaving this way as often but sometimes tried to refuse gifts or favors because of her status as a slave.

Misha and Lunoa nervously followed us into the restaurant. I

glanced at Misha before whispering to Mireille, “I should free her of her slave status soon, should I not?”

According to the laws of the empire, there were several ways to free a slave. The most straightforward one was to use money. In addition to the money I gave Misha, I saved some on the side based on her efforts, intending to free her when that amount reached the necessary sum.

“Legally speaking, you could gift her enough money to free herself. However, I don’t believe Misha would like that. Beastkin are prideful.”

“You’re right. Treating her like a charity case may hurt her feelings.”

“How about you reach out to Mister Cedric, miss? I’m sure he’ll have some advice for you.”

“I shall.”

Just as I asked Mireille to make an appointment with Cedric after our return to the capital, someone came to guide us to our table. Kellevan lived up to its reputation as the most popular entertainment city in the empire: the fancy restaurant was full of noble visitors. The employees seemed properly trained to handle them, and the service was top-notch.

The chef’s ambition was evident in the minor yet ingenious modifications to the traditional imperial cuisine served to us. Lunoa and Misha were so focused on maintaining etiquette that they seemed on edge. Only time and practice would help with that. On the other hand, Alice had no such concerns, and I wiped the sauce on the side of her mouth with an awkward smile.

After finishing our meal, we went back to the inn. It was still early, so I helped Alice and Lunoa practice their magic in my room.

“You’re doing well, Lunoa,” I said. “Picture your mana surrounding your body.”

“Yes!”

“Alice, try to slowly push the mana you gathered into your right hand toward your left hand.”

“O-Okay.”

I was teaching Lunoa body reinforcement magic while Alice learned mana manipulation—the basis of every spell. After discussing it with her, I focused on showing Alice water attribute spells. She already knew a few, but her knowledge was superficial at best. Her spells had no power, meaning needed to practice the basics to improve.

While I taught them, Mireille helped Misha better herself as an attendant. According to Mireille, today they’d be working on preparing tea.

Once we sent Alice and the others to bed, Mireille and I went to the inn’s restaurant for a glass of wine. As the two of us were drinking, we saw a silhouette enter the inn, swaying unsteadily with every step.

“Oh! If it isn’t Miss Ellie and Miss Mireille! It’sh not often I shee the two of you up sho late! Drinking?” Tida exclaimed happily.

She sounded drunk.

“I see you’ve had quite a few drinks yourself,” I said.

“Even if this city is safe, a young woman shouldn’t be alone in such a state of ebriety,” Mireille warned. “Haven’t you heard the rumors? It’s dangerous.”

We’d heard those rumors while we were out earlier today. Apparently, several people had reported seeing a suspicious individual in the past few days. Truth be told, I wasn’t surprised to hear that suspicious people were roaming around, considering the type of city this was. Anyhow, Mireille and I steadied Tida so she wouldn’t tumble down.

“It’sh all good! I’m shtrong, don’t wo—Bleurgh!”

“Wait! If you’re going to vomit, do it outside!” I yelled.

“Let us carry her outside,” said Mireille.

“All right. Careful...”

Upon taking her to the front so she could vomit, we dragged her to her room.

On the day of the meeting with Hilde, we had a light meal at the inn while discussing the last details.

When we finished, I said, “Mireille and I are off to the meeting. You may spend the rest of the day as you see fit.”

Lunoa and Misha would take care of Alice for me. I was a little anxious about leaving her with them, but Lunoa and Misha were already thirteen. While they were not adults yet, they weren’t children anymore. At this age, most commoners already worked as adventurers, killing monsters on a daily basis, or as apprentices. Meanwhile, noble ladies underwent bridal lessons at their fiancé’s house. Fights seemed to break out quite regularly in this city. However, the guards also patrolled very often, making the streets fairly safe. Furthermore, being overprotective wasn’t good, and I had to support them so they could become independent.

“Are you still going to the public square in front of the main gate?” I asked.

“Yes,” Lunoa answered. “We heard that street performers would put on a show there today.”

“We’re thinking of visiting the free market after that,” added Misha.

“That sounds fun. Make sure to come back to the inn before nightfall. Alice, you must be good and listen to what Lunoa and Misha tell you, all right?” I said.

“Yes, mama,” she said.

Mireille and I saw them off before heading to Hilde’s residence. We were the last of our group to leave for the day. While Tida had

come home completely drunk last night, she'd left early in the morning, happily humming songs.

Hilde Callard's residence was located near the back gate, opposite the city from the main gate. The bustling, dazzling atmosphere of the city's center had a clear disconnect from this area, where the residences of local officials, conference rooms, public offices, and other such facilities took up most of the space. Additionally, Hilde's residence was large and as impressive as a noble's mansion.

When we entered, Mireille was taken to an antechamber where servants could await their masters while I was guided to the drawing room. A beautiful demonkin woman with a thin, revealing dress and a transparent shawl wrapped around her shoulders awaited me. Two horns, the marks of her demonic lineage, stretched from her temples to her forehead like a tiara.

"Welcome. Long time no see, Miss Ellie," Hilde greeted me.

"It has been a long time indeed, Councillor Callard."

"My, no need to be so formal. Just call me Hilde."

I let out a little laugh. "I shall do so. Feel free to call me Ellie as well."

Hilde was a former prostitute, but a single look into her eyes told me she was brilliant and not to be underestimated. The two of us shook hands, and I sat down, offering her the chocolate desserts I'd brought.

"Oh! Those are all the rage in the capital, are they not?"

"Indeed, they are. Chocolate is perfect for baking cookies and cakes alike."

"There's a deep bitterness hidden beyond the sweetness," said Hilde after taking a bite.

"The sweetness and bitterness can be adjusted to taste," I told

her. “We’re currently focusing on developing a chocolate dessert that goes well with alcohol.”

“How interesting. I also like the fact that it can be shaped so freely.”

Hilde had taken a genuine interest in chocolate. I told her a little more about it to loosen up the atmosphere before moving on to business.

“I requested this meeting to discuss aqua silk with you,” I said, taking out a piece of aqua silk from a box I’d previously enchanted with preservation magic.

Aqua silk was practically water in the shape of fabric. Its peculiar texture made it feel like it could flow down your hands when held. On top of that, the alchemists and researchers I’d poached from the kingdom had recently figured out how to use magic to give aqua silk different textures or change its color.

“I heard rumors about you figuring out how to make it, but...it was all true. This is real aqua silk...” Hilde let out, impressed.

“Indeed. Production has started, and I already have some stock. For now, I only intend to inform a handful of high-ranked nobles and influential merchants.”

“Well, I can already tell this will be a big transaction.”

I’d never dealt with Hilde personally, but our firms had already conducted several transactions as she often purchased our cosmetics. Thanks to that, we settled most things smoothly despite some time spent arguing about the price. Once we came to an agreement, we signed the contract and spent the rest of the afternoon engaged in lighthearted conversation and praising one another while enjoying chocolate treats.

“So Ellie,” Hilde eventually said with a little laugh. “Would you like to join me for dinner tonight?”

“I’m most thankful for your invitation, but my adopted daughter and disciple are waiting for me.”

“How about we invite them too?”

“In that case, I gladly accept.”

After accepting Hilde’s invitation, I stood up to excuse myself for the time being. Right at that moment, we heard noises coming from the corridor. Hilde and I exchanged glances before turning to the door in unison. The door opened wide in one swift motion, and Mireille barged in even as Hilde’s butler and maids tried to stop her.

“Mireille?!” I remarked.

“Miss Ellie! It’s an emergency! Alice and Lunoa are in trouble!”

“Calm down, Mireille. What happened.”

I put a hand on her shoulder to get her to compose herself. Her breathing was ragged, yet she took a deep breath and said, “Alice and Lunoa were kidnapped. Though Misha fought with the culprit, she couldn’t stop them. She’s heavily injured.”

“What?!” I stopped myself from rushing out of the room and faced Mireille. “Where is Misha?”

“She’s receiving treatment here as she came to find us. Follow me.”

Mireille ran out, and I followed her. Hilde was also behind us.

“Misha!” I exclaimed, entering the room Mireille had led me to.

Misha lay on the sofa while an old man used healing magic on her.

“Lawrence, how is she?” Hilde asked the old healer.

“Not well,” he replied. “She has deep wounds and several fractures. Her right eye was crushed, while her internal organs suffered badly. My magic won’t be enough to save her.”

Deep gashes covered Misha’s body. The healer had wrapped bandages around them to stop the bleeding, still the blood had

soaked the fabric. Large patches of skin had turned deep red on her face, arms, and torso from internal bleeding, and a horrible open wound had been left in place of her right eye. She was losing too much blood.

"That's..."

Hilde seemed to want to say something but swallowed her words at the pitiful spectacle. Misha wouldn't last more than a few hours at best. Unless a high-level healer saw her, she was done for.

"Move!" I exclaimed, pushing the old healer out of the way and rushing to Misha. "Divine Artifact, Grimoire of Beelzebub." After materializing my Divine Artifact, I immediately cast a powerful healing spell. "High Heal!"

Hilde and the old healer gasped in shock, but I didn't have the leeway to worry about them.

"Argh... M-Miss Ellie..."

"Misha! Don't move! I closed your wounds, but I can't bring back the blood you lost with my magic."

"Miss Ellie...Miss Alice...and Miss Lunoa were..."

"I know, Misha. You did your best to get to us so you could warn us, didn't you? Thank you."

"I...couldn't protect...them..."

Misha held out her right hand and opened it, then I saw one of the ribbons the three had bought together the other day. She'd held on to it the entire time. She then did her best to explain to me what had happened.

"Everything will be fine," I told her as I gently patted her head. "I'll find Alice and Lunoa, so you have to rest, all right?"

A single teardrop ran down her cheek and she lost consciousness. I took the ribbon from her hand. Several blonde strands were stuck to it—it was one of Alice's. She was so happy to have matching

ribbons with Lunoa and Misha that, since buying them, she hadn't removed them once. I had warned her that her hair would get tangled while she slept, but she had ignored my advice.

"Mireille, please take care of Misha."

"Understood, miss."

As soon as Mireille informed me of what Misha had told her earlier, I turned around and started walking away.

"Ellie," Hilde called from behind me.

"I'm sorry, Hilde, but our meal will have to wait."

"Wait! I'm coming with you! My guests got hurt here, in Kellevan. I cannot let this slide."

I turned to face her and saw the anger burning in her eyes.

"All right," I agreed. "Let us hurry."

As we walked toward the entrance, Hilde gave orders to her servants in rapid succession.

"Close all of the gates!"

"Yes!"

"Send familiars to relay my orders to every guard! I want the citizens on lockdown! Check the identity of every suspicious individual you come across. If they try to resist, arrest them!"

"At once!"

"Miss Hilde, the carriage is ready."

"Thank you. Ellie, let us—"

"I don't need one."

"Huh?"

“I’ll be much faster on foot.”

As soon as I stepped out of Hilde’s residence, I reinforced my body. With my magic, I could run faster than a horse for a limited time.

“Ellie!”

I ignored Hilde and kicked off the stone paving, dashing away. Hilde had spurred the city’s garrison into action, and the guards urged the citizens to evacuate. There were still many people on the streets, so I had to dodge them as I rushed toward the main gate, where unknown forces had attacked Misha and the others. The scenery was a blur as I traveled, and I was surprised by a sudden voice coming from beside me.

“Ellie, you must calm down.”

“Hilde...”

Just then, I took a better look to the side and saw Hilde running alongside me in her evening gown. She used as much mana, if not more, to reinforce her body. Demonkin, like herself, surpassed humans in terms of physical and magical abilities. Long ago, when the Demon King led them, they’d even fought alone against a coalition of humans, elves, dwarves, and beastkins in an attempt to take over the world. Although most countries had normalized the relationships between the demonkin and other races, some still harbored hatred toward them. Hilde appeared to have even more mana than the average demonkin. I was moving as fast as possible, but she could follow me easily without breaking a sweat.

“Going through the central district will be faster,” Hilde said. “Come, this way.”

I followed her, and we dashed through the city under the setting sun.

◆

Following Ellie and Mireille’s departure to visit Hilde, Lunoa and Misha took Alice to the main gate’s square.

“We’re going to see street performers today, Alice.”

“What’s that?”

“They’re people that perform their skills in public, Miss Alice,” Misha explained. “Like acrobatics or pantomime.”

“Huh?”

Lunoa laughed, took Alice’s hand, and started running toward the square, saying, “You’ll understand when you see them. We’re almost there.”

“Miss Lunoa! Don’t run, you two, it’s dangerous!” cautioned Misha, quickly catching up with them.

“Wow! Amazing!” Alice exclaimed, clapping along with the rest of the crowd as a lady expertly juggled five daggers.

After watching people perform fire breathing, pantomime, balancing on a ball, and more tricks, the three girls found a stall nearby the square and enjoyed some food. They then walked toward the free market, a special market where merchants and regular people could sell goods. Anyone who paid the fee would obtain a one-day permission to open a stall there. This mode of operation meant that swindler often participated, but it was still an interesting place to find rare and unusual items. Even without purchasing anything, the three girls had a fun time walking through the market and looking at the items.

The sun had just passed its zenith when a peculiar feeling assaulted Misha.

“Huh?”

“What’s wrong, Misha?” asked Lunoa.

“Nothing... I just felt...off,” Misha said, looking around and trying to find the source of her premonition.

The missing stone slab? The laundry hanging on that balcony?

The river flowing down? The groundsheet laid out with goods? The unmanned stall? The skewer on the ground? The old street lamp?

“There’s no one around!!!” blurted Misha at her sudden realization. Her ears and tail stood on end. “Miss Lunoa! Miss Alice!”

“Huh?”

“What’s wrong, Big Sister Misha?”

“Run! This is magic!”

Despite trying to take Lunoa and Alice’s hands, Misha was suddenly kicked in the abdomen and sent flying back several meters.

“Argh!”

“Damn it! That kid’s perceptive!” fumed the man who’d just sent Misha flying, clicking his tongue.

He grabbed Lunoa’s arm. Two of his companions appeared and caught Alice too.

“Miss Lunoa! Miss Alice!”

“MM! MMMM!”

Alice tried to scream and break free, but the man holding her covered her mouth with a piece of cloth. She felt her body grow weak and passed out in a matter of seconds.

“Alice! Swift winds running through the wilderness, O fierce winds, gather into a—Urgh!”

The man holding Lunoa noticed her trying to cast a spell, so he covered her mouth. “Tsk! That’s the chant for Air Slash! That kid can use magic! Hurry, give me the drug!”

Misha gathered her mana into her legs and pulled out her dagger before dashing toward one of the men.

“Damn brat!”

Even as he tried to punch Misha, she dodged and slashed at his arm, running her blade along it. His arm was too thick for her to cut off, so she hoped to deal as much damage as possible by opening a long gash.

“Argh!”

“Seriously? Why are you struggling? She’s a kid!”

“Don’t move, brat!” screamed the man who held Alice, holding a dagger to the blonde child’s throat.

“Miss Alice!”

“One more step and I kill her!”

While the man threatened Misha, his comrade pushed the piece of cloth soaked in medicine against Lunoa’s nose, making her lose consciousness as well.

Misha clenched her teeth and glared at the men.

“You stupid brat!” the man Misha had hurt yelled, striking her.

Misha yelped and fell to the ground. He kicked her again and again. The unpleasing sound of bones cracking echoed in the alley.

“You got me good, didn’t ya?” he said, groaning and beating the young girl who moaned in pain.

He stopped to pick up the dagger she’d dropped and started slashing at her.

“A damn brat like you shouldn’t get cocky, ya hear me?!” he spat, grabbing her by the hair and plunging the dagger into her right eye in one swift motion.

“AAAAAAAAAAH!!!” Misha screamed in pain as blood splattered, dying the stone pavement red.

“Hey! Hurry it along! The effects of Crowd Dispersal will wear out!” said one of the man’s companions.

“Tsk! Damn it! We don’t need that brat, do we?”

“Nope. Catkins barely have any mana.”

“Then you won’t mind if I finish her off, right?!”

The man looked down at Misha, lying in a puddle of her own blood, and kicked her in the stomach. She coughed up fresh blood as she rolled toward the river, only to crash into the railing and let out a pained groan. Her consciousness was hazy, but she held on to the stone railing and pulled herself to her feet. She tried to take a step but toppled over the railing, falling into the river headfirst.

“Come back here, you brat!”

“We don’t have time for that! Let’s go!”

“But—”

“She’s as good as dead falling into the river with these wounds!”

“Damn it!”

Mere moments after the men left, Misha crawled back onto the riverbank. She saw the lone ribbon on the ground and picked it up almost unconsciously.

“M-Miss Ellie...”

Misha gritted her teeth to bear the pain and reinforced her body once more before hurrying toward the opposite side of the city where Ellie was. She covered her entire body in mana without even thinking about it, successfully slowing down the bleeding, and leaped onto a roof, dashing through the city in a straight line.

◇

After passing through the center of the city, Hilde and I reached the main gate square. We immediately headed toward the free

market located nearby. Misha reported that the attack occurred while they were on the market's edge. The guards urged the sellers to pack up their goods and methodically questioned them, only leading them toward another area once they'd been cleared of suspicion. All in all, the guards of this city appeared to be very competent.

"Look, Ellie."

Hilde crouched and pointed at a small scrap of paper on the ground. I could feel magic residue on it.

"That's a scroll's fragment."

Normally, a used scroll would burn to ashes. But poorly made scrolls sometimes failed to combust properly, and scraps remained.

"Considering the mana remaining on it, the scroll must have recorded a dark attribute spell," stated Hilde.

"A dark attribute spell... It may have been Crowd Dispersal. Misha said that the people around them vanished all of a sudden." I gathered mana into my left hand and chanted, "Grimoire of Belphegor."

As soon as my Divine Artifact materialized, I took out a knife and slashed at my wrist. Blood spurted out with force and Hilde screamed, "Ellie?!"

"I'm fine."

Once a small puddle of blood formed on the ground, I closed my wound with a water attribute healing spell. Then, I started chanting.

"O four-legged familiar of the darkness, O ruler of the scorched wilderness, O single wing of nightmares. I offer you my blood in accordance with our contract. Heed my call! Summon: Hellhound!"

My blood stirred until it formed a magic circle on the stone paving, from which a beast covered in black fur crawled out. One strip of red fur stretched along its back all the way to its tail. The

two-meter-tall hellhound opened its mouth, showing me its sharp fangs.

“No way... Is that a monster from the underworld?”

“It is. It’s a hell hound. I formed a contract with it through my Divine Artifact.”

I took out Alice’s ribbon and brought it to the hound’s nose. Hellhounds had incredibly sensitive noses, allowing them to smell and track their prey over dozens of kilometers. If I used that ability, I’d find Alice and Lunoa.

“Follow that smell,” I ordered the hound.

It growled and pushed its snout into the fabric. Then it turned around and started walking away, smelling the floor. Summoning a two-meter-tall monster as my hunting dog may have seemed exaggerated, but I did not care. I just wanted to find Alice and Lunoa.

We followed the dog and reached where Misha and the assailants had most likely fought. Even if the blood had been washed off, there were still stains here and there.

“The little catkin lady must have fought here,” Hilde pointed out.

“Indeed. She must have fallen into the water there,” I said pointing at a spot. “Hellhound, keep following the scent.”

The hound barked and resumed its search. The guards had ensured that no one remained in the streets, but occasionally, people peered from their windows. Upon seeing the gigantic dog, they promptly closed the shutters. When this was over, I’d have to count on Hilde to explain the situation to the citizens.

Eventually, the hellhound stopped in front of a house.

“Here?” I asked, and the dog barked.

At first glance, there was nothing strange about this house. While not as large as a nobleman’s residence, it appeared to belong to a

wealthy family. I focused on feeling people's presence inside the house, but I could only feel one person.

"I'm going in," I declared.

I was about to kick the door open when Hilde stopped me. She knocked instead.

"Yes?" a man asked as he opened the door.

He did not look particularly suspicious.

"I'd like to come in," Hilde said.

"Huh? Miss Hilde?!"

She placed her hand on the door so the man couldn't close it and pushed it open.

"W-Wait! I'd rather you didn't. Miss Hilde?! What's going on?"

"We suspect you of being involved in a kidnapping case," she replied. "I suggest you behave and cooperate with our investigation."

"N-No! Wait! A kidnapping?! I'd never! I am a senior magistrate acting under the governor's authority! You can't intrude on my privacy like—"

The man collapsed before he could finish his sentence. I'd felt a slight surge of mana, so I assumed Hilde had done something to him.

I noticed that Hilde used magic incredibly efficiently when we ran side by side, barely wasting any mana. When preparing a spell, people gathered mana to use and let some of it escape during the process in most cases. With practice and mastery, you could reduce that amount. It also made it more difficult for others to notice that when one was using magic. Considering her efficiency, Hilde seemed better at magic than I was.

We pushed the man into the house and entered.

“Are you sure you should have done that?” I asked. “Isn’t that man close to the governor?”

“I didn’t have a choice, did I? You would have killed him if I hadn’t stepped in.”

Perhaps my subsequent silence was enough to let Hilde know she was right.

I knew that Hilde was a talented merchant since she’d overcome her start as a prostitute to reach her current position. Now, I was discovering that she was also an accomplished fighter.

The hellhound tried to cram its body through the door but ended up breaking the frame. Once inside the house, I had it follow the scent again, and it started scratching at the floor in the middle of the living room. I ordered it to come back to me, and I stepped forward, kicking the ground. The noise of the impact then echoed throughout the house.

“It’s hollow. There’s a hidden passage under this.”

“Hilde, could you please step back?”

We had no way of knowing how to open the trap door, and I had no intention to waste my time thinking about it. Having confirmed that Hilde was against the wall in a corner of the room after glancing behind my shoulder, I took out a sword from my Grimoire of Mammon. Flügel had yet to restore itself, so I’d bought a new sword in the imperial capital. I imbued it with my mana and cut through the floor, opening a hole and revealing a staircase under us.

The staircase seemed to lead to an underground passage. I tried to take a look, but it was too long for me to see the end. Even though Hilde and I would fit just fine, it was too narrow for the hound. I sent it back to the underworld, and we walked into the dark passage.

I picked up the magic item attached to the wall at the entrance of the passage—a lantern—to light our way, then we kept

advancing. My senses were on alert as I tried to sense potential traps until Hilde spoke to me.

“That man said he was connected to the governor, did he not?”

“He did. Does that ring a bell?”

“Brutus, the governor, has gotten his hands on a lot of money recently. He visits one of my brothels almost every week to spend a night with my most popular girls. It’s a luxurious establishment. The sort that noblemen can splurge on occasionally and that commoners can only dream of visiting once in their lifetime. A local governor shouldn’t have the means to spend so extravagantly. I tasked people to look into the source of his newfound wealth, but I have yet to hear anything. It may very well be linked to this kidnapping...”

“On my way to Kellevan, I met holy knights looking into kidnapping cases on the road that leads to the city,” I said.

“I’ve heard about this. Several people have gone missing in nearby towns as well. Although there haven’t been any kidnapping reports in Kellevan, the governor could have suppressed the news if they were targeting orphans and travelers.”

Our whispers echoed in the dark passage. There were no branchings paths or turns, just a straight path we had to keep walking on.

“We’ve been walking for a while, haven’t we?”

“We’re probably outside the city by now.”

“Do you think their hideout is located outside the city?”

“There are ruins of the Old Kingdom in the rocky outskirts of Kellevan.”

“A dungeon?!”

“No, just regular ruins. But some of these spots have been designated sacred by the Church of Ibris, so visiting the area

wouldn't look suspicious."

We finally came upon a staircase rising toward the surface. As we climber it, I inspected every step for traps. When we got to the top, I could sense two people beyond an iron door that blocked our way. I looked at Hilde, and she put her finger against the door without a sound. Immediately after, I distinctly heard two people falling to the ground.

"It should be fine," Hilde said.

I nodded and grabbed the doorknob, opening it. Night had already fallen, but candlesticks lit up the place and provided a clear field of vision. The stone corridor we stepped into resembled the inside of a dungeon. There were passages to the left and the right. The path on the right seemed to lead to a dead end, while the path on the left led to another passage. It appeared the men who had passed out on the floor had most likely been standing guard.

"Huh? These two are..."

I was taken aback when I saw the two men's clothing. They wore priest robes and necklaces bearing the holy crest of the Church of Ibris around their necks.

"Clergymen?" I let out.

"This can't be!" whispered Hilde, her eyes wide open in confusion as she looked around. "We're inside the ruins of the old Sanctuary of Kelleria...one of the holy sites of the Church of Ibris!"

◆

Lunoa opened her eyes, noticing her mouth covered as well as her hands and feet bound with rope. A man was carrying her over his shoulder like some sort of luggage.

“Ngh!”

“Tsk. Awake already? Looks like the drug was too weak. You better behave, brat. Any funny business and your little friend is dead.”

“Nnnh!”

Lunoa could see another man carrying an unconscious Alice over his shoulder. Resisting would be too reckless, she concluded. Instead, she observed her surroundings. They seemed to be inside some ruins.

She was suddenly thrown on the ground. “Don’t you dare move!”

“Nnngh!” she groaned.

The men opened a large jail cell and tossed her and Alice inside. One of them also entered and swiftly connected two long chains that were attached to the wall to each of their ankles. The chains were long enough for them to move about within the cell but too short for them to escape.

Just as the man was about to exit the cell, he turned around and said, “Oops, almost forgot. Gotta put one of these on you too.”

He grabbed a collar from a small desk near the wall and approached Lunoa again, securing it around her neck.

“This is an antimagic collar straight from Haldoria. You won’t be able to use any magic so don’t even think of resisting.”

At these words, he closed the door of the cell and left.

Lunao crawled toward Alice to check on her when she felt a presence from behind. “Mmm! Nnngh?!”

“Be quiet. I’ll undo the ropes for you.”

Lunoa struggled to look over her shoulder but eventually saw a boy reaching his hands toward her. A chain also bound him. The boy seemed a couple of years older than her. He wore dirty clothes, and his skin was tanned and slightly burned from too much exposure to the sun. Others were behind him, although she couldn’t make out their faces in the darkness.

“All done,” the boy said.

“Thank you,” Lunoa replied before rushing to Alice. There were no obvious wounds on her body; she simply appeared to be asleep.

“Is she all right?” the boy asked.

“I don’t know…”

“Don’t worry. She must be asleep because of the drug they used. There were others like her, but they all woke up in the end.”

“I see…”

Lunoa hugged Alice close to her chest.

“I’m Nanaki. What’s your name?”

“Lunoa,” she answered, trying her best to suppress the anxiety that threatened to overcome her. “D-Do you know where we are?

“I don’t. I…” Nanaki paused and glanced behind his shoulder. “We’re all the same. We were all kidnapped. Someone from Kellevan said they were taken to a house and then dragged through an underground tunnel before ending up here. But there are even people who were abducted abroad here.”

“Still, that tells us that we’re in Kellevan. Or at least, close by,” Lunoa said.

“Yeah,” the boy agreed. “That’s likely.”

Lunoa caressed Alice’s hair gently as she contemplated the

situation.

“If we’re still close to Kellevan, Miss Ellie will rescue us as soon as she notices we’ve disappeared. We just need to wait… But what about Misha?! What happened to her? Right before I lost consciousness, she was fighting with the abducters. Since we’re here, she must have lost… Misha is resourceful. She would have fled to warn Miss Ellie. In that case, I need to protect Alice until she gets to us,” muttered Lunoa.

Alice let out a small whimper. Lunoa didn’t know whether it was because she’d heard her speak or because the drug was wearing off, but she seemed to be waking up.

“Alice!”

“B-Big Sister Lunoa?”

Alice looked around with an uneasy expression on her face, so Lunoa stroked her backside gently to calm her down.

“You’re finally awake,” she said softly, speaking slowly to avoid alarming her. “Are you hurt anywhere?”

“N-No, I’m fine.”

Lunoa worried the kidnappers would return now that Alice was awake, and she stared at the door only for nothing to happen.

“Mr. Nanaki, don’t the kidnappers watch the cell?”

“They don’t. They only come in for two reasons. To bring in new people and leave as soon as they’ve restrained them with the chains…or to take people away. By the way, just call me Nanaki. Honorifics are a hassle.”

“A-All right. In that case, I don’t believe we should stay put. Let’s escape.”

“But how? I’ve tried to break the chain with a rock and have tried to yank at it, but it doesn’t budge.”

Lunoa held her hand out toward the chain that bound her foot. “Swift winds running through the wilderness, O fierce winds, gather into a blade, Air Slash.”

As she chanted, mana gathered into her hand but it dispersed before she could activate the spell.

“You truly are a magician,” Nanaki said. “But that’s no use. He said so earlier. As long as that collar’s on you, you won’t be able to use magic. Look, there’s another magician with the same collar on.”

He pointed at a girl who seemed roughly the same age as Lunoa. At that moment, Lunoa noticed that the girl’s clothes were of better quality than those of Nanaki She took Alice by the hand and walked up to her.

“Excuse me, would you mind letting me see your collar?”

“Huh? N-No, go ahead,” said the girl.

Lunoa stared at it intently. Nanaki, who’d followed her, looked over her shoulder.

“Learn anything?” he asked.

“Yes,” Lunoa said. “Haldoria invented these antimagic collars. They’re a reproduction of a magic item from the days of the Old Kingdom. But there’s something strange...”

Nanaki tilted his head to the side. “Something strange?”

By nature, Lunoa’s unique spell, Item Analysis, required extensive knowledge of many topics. In addition to Ellie and Mireille, Lunoa was taught by several private tutors to widen her expertise. That was how she knew that something was off.

“Antimagic restraints are manufactured and disposed of in the kingdom under the strict control of the government. Whenever some are exported, they’re marked with a serial number and tracked. However, there is no serial number on this collar. The magic circle engraved on the inside is also slightly crooked. It must be an imitation... No, that’s not it... It likely failed to meet the

standard magic resistance figure despite going through the regular process. That's why it ended up here after being sold on the black market."

"The magic...*resistance*?"

"These antimagic restraints prevent the use of magic by absorbing the mana people gather when they wish to cast a spell before releasing it back into the air. But there is a limit to how much mana these can withstand at once."

Nanaki and the other children in the cell listened intently to Lunoa's explanation, seeming confused.

"In that case..." Lunoa whispered before saying, "Alice."

"Yes?"

"Pour mana into my collar. As much as you can, right where the magic circle is."

Alice had lost consciousness so quickly that the kidnappers never noticed that she could use magic. It was a natural assumption to make as very few children her age could control their mana enough to do so. As a result, the men did not force her to wear a collar.

"O-Okay. H-Here I go," said Alice, hesitantly placing her hand over the magic circle.

Lunoa nodded, and she started pouring mana into it. While Alice still had much to learn and was far from being good enough to fight with magic, she had a tremendous pool of mana. At first, the magic circle kept sucking her mana and dispersing it, but it reached its limits, and cracks started to appear on the collar. It eventually cracked with a high-pitched noise, then the pieces fell to the ground.

"Oh!" cheered the boys and girls trapped in the cell quietly.

Nanaki reminded them to stay quiet before Alice started, so they all managed to hold in their cries of joy.

“Ow...”

“Lunoa?!”

“Big Sister Lunoa!”

“I-I’m all right...”

There was a small wound on Lunoa’s neck, although she couldn’t tell whether a piece of the collar had cut her or the excess mana had.

“Echo, O bells of the revelations. Let your music travel far and wide, carried by the spring breeze. Healing Wind.”

Lunoa cast the only wind attribute healing spell she knew. While one could use wind attribute healing spells to achieve an area of effect or heal distant targets, they fell short of light attribute spells for healing power. Due to Lunoa’s inexperience, she could not fully heal her wound, and a red scar remained on her neck.

“Are you okay, Lunoa?” asked Nanaki.

“I’m fine. I closed the wound for now. It still hurts a little bit but it’s nothing bad.”

“Big Sister Lunoa...”

“Don’t worry, Alice.”

Nanaki held out his hand to Lunoa, which she took to stand up.

“We’re getting out,” she declared. “Will you follow us?”

Nanaki looked at the rest of the captives before nodding. “I’m coming with you! Who knows what will happen to us if we stay here!”

The others exchanged glances and made up their minds too. They all stood up one by one.

“Swift winds running through the wilderness. O fierce winds,

gather into a blade, Air Slash," Lunao chanted for the umpteenth time, skillfully cutting off the chain that bound a young girl.

"That was the last one," said the young girl.

"Yeah," responded Nanaki, helping the girl stand up.

"Next up is the door," said Lunoa.

"Will you be able to? Unlike the chains, the door doesn't have thinner links you can aim at."

"It'll be fine. A keyhole's interior is weaker than the rest. If I use mana to wear it down before firing a precise blow right to the weak point, it should break."

Lunoa put her finger against the small keyhole.

"O surging gale. O tempest born of a giant's sigh. Winds of judgment that conquer the small. Swirl toward the heavens and sweep across the wilderness. Blade Tempest!"

The steady flow of mana inside the keyhole instantly gave way to a powerful spell. With no way to escape, the powerful tempest crushed the sturdy lock from within. Now that the the lock was in that state, the door cracked open with the lightest push from Lunoa.

"Amazing!"

"Urgh..."

"Big Sister Lunoa!"

"Lunoa!"

"I'm fine... I just used too much mana at once. Blade Tempest is one of the most powerful wind attribute spells. It requires a lot of mana, and since my version is still imperfect, I wasted even more of it to control it. For all the mana I used, the impact was lackluster compared to the real thing."

At the time, Lunoa was training on basic spells with no attributes

that one could use to reinforce their body or create barriers, how to utilize her unique spell—Item Analysis—and wind attribute spells. Wind magic was swift and sharp but lacked destructive power, making it difficult to use to break physical objects. All the medium-level spells she knew lacked the power to break the lock, forcing her to cast an unperfect version of Blade Tempest, even at the cost of a significant amount of her mana.

Lunoa tried to keep her breathing in check as she took Alice's hand. She looked at Nanaki, and the young man nodded immediately.

He fully opened the door and declared, "Let's go!"

Lunoa followed Nanaki out of the cell and quietly played as he put his ear against the door that led to the corridor. She didn't have much mana left. Even if she stuck to lower-grade spells, she could only fire a few times. Thus, she could defeat two or three men at most if she included the mana cost of body reinforcement.

While she pondered how to best use whatever mana she had left, Nanaki waved his hand and said, "We're clear. There isn't anyone on the other side."

After checking that everyone was ready to follow him, he opened the door softly and stepped into the corridor as quietly as he could. Lunoa and Alice followed right behind, as did the others. There were seven of them, including herself, too many for a covert operation. Thankfully, there were no traces of the kidnappers, and they could hear fighting noise from afar.

"It's noisy. Is that why there's no one around?" whispered Nanaki.

"I don't know... But this is our chance."

"Right. Everyone, stay strong until we get out! It won't be long!"

The group advanced through the stone corridors. Candles dimly lit their surroundings, which made it difficult for them to remember where they'd come from. The noises of the fighting also echoed so

much that they could hardly tell where they originated.

“Stop!” Nanaki suddenly warned.

The corridor widened near the end of the passage, and the area beyond it was much brighter. Five men were visible in the distance. They seemed to be preparing for something but none of the children could tell what it was.

“Hey, what’s up with all that noise?”

“Intruders, I think.”

“Seriously? Are we gonna be okay?”

“What are you freaking out for? Just gotta kill them, and we’ll be good. The governor will cover up our tracks like he always does. Come on, let’s get started.”

The men gathered around a stone altar in the center of the room. On that altar was...

An unconscious girl who appeared to be about ten was bound to the structure. Lunoa gasped in shock, her eyes widening.

“That’s Marka!” faltered Nanaki.

“Do you know her?” Lunoa asked.

“Not really. They dragged her out of the cell right before bringing the two of you in.”

One of the men placed a crystal ball next to Marka’s head and the others extended one of their hands toward the young girl. Then, the man at the center started reciting a peculiar incantation.

“Wh-What are they doing?” inquired Nanaki.

“I’m not sure. I think that’s the language of the Old Kingdom,” Lunoa replied. “Also, look at that man in the middle. He’s wearing a crest of the Church of Ibris around his neck.”

“So he’s a holy man?!”

“Considering the material and size of the crest…he must be a priest.”

As the children observed the scene from a distance, the man finished chanting and activated his magic spell.

“AAAAAAAH!!!” Marka awoke abruptly, and her body started convulsing. Her eyes rolled back as she screamed.

The more pain the girl experienced, the redder the crystal ball became.

“AAAAH! AAAAAAAAH!!!”

Lunoa and the others were speechless, unable to do anything but watch Marka writhe in pain. Blood suddenly started gushing out from all of her orifices, and she fell flat on the altar, going still. The priest appeared to care little about the corpse of the child. Instead, he picked up the dark red-dyed crystal and nodded with a satisfied expression. He turned his heels and walked away opposite from where Lunoa and the others were hiding.

“Clean up the leftovers,” he ordered.

“Yessir!”

The four men grabbed Marka by the hair, pulling it up and revealing her bloodied face. One of the children couldn’t hold back a shriek at the sight.

“Who’s there?!”

The men’s attention flew to Lunoa and the others.

“They escaped!”

“Damn kids, trying to run!”

“Oh no! They found us!” exclaimed Nanaki, jumping forward and dashing toward the men to protect the others.

“Wait, Nanaki!” shouted Lunoa, following him. “Alice, use defensive magic!”

“B-But, I—”

“Just do it!”

“O-O water, let your current block away my enemies, Water Wall!”

The wall of water separated the hall from the corridor. While Alice’s training focused on mana control and defensive spells, she’d only started learning magic half a year ago. Yet she had to cast a spell in such a situation, without even a staff or wand to help her control her mana. Her Water Wall took physical form, but she’d done a poor job of imbuing mana into it, and it was so weak that anyone could easily walk right through it.

Lunoa had to act before the men noticed. She snuck behind Nanaki, who was wrestling with the man closest to them, and gathered her mana.

“Shoot forth and let your pressure pulverize my enemies! Air Bullet!”

“Argh!”

Unlike the short incantation she’d used against the brigand, the full version lent her spell more power. Even without her weapon, she sent the burly man flying back several meters. He struck his head on the ground and passed out on the spot. At this sight, the three other men became wary of Lunoa.

“That brat can use magic!”

“Why isn’t she wearing a collar, then?!”

“I did put one on her!”

Nanaki took advantage of their confusion to grab a candlestick and hit one of the men with it.

“Urgh! Damn you!”

The man immediately raised his arm to guard, but his bone cracking echoed. Despite his familiarity with brawls, the man remained unfazed. He fixed his posture and kicked Nanaki in the stomach. The boy fell back, but Lunoa, who’d been concealing herself behind Nanaki, nimbly stepped forward as if she was dancing.

Another man immediately swung his fist toward Lunoa’s face. Her heart was pounding, and she listened to the hasty beats. For some reason, she felt that she could calmly look at this all from a distance. She was on the verge of panic from fear and stress, using a skill to dodge her assailant’s fist. It was as if there were two of her.

“Feather Steps.”

The skill she’d just used made her body incredibly light for a few seconds. She leaped, dodging the man’s fist at the last second, and rotated her body in the air before she reached the ceiling. She remembered these three-dimensional defensive movements that Ellie had once taught to Misha.

“Swift winds running through the wilderness. O fierce winds, gather into a blade, Air Slash.”

“AAH!” the man screamed, jumping to the ground to evade the blade of air from above.

But it was too late, and Lunoa’s magic cut deep into his legs, shattering the stone altar.

“Focus on the girl! Don’t let her use magic!” one of the men yelled.

He picked up a stick-like object on the ground and swung it at Lunoa, who’d just landed.

Lunao tried to dodge but suddenly felt dizzy. She almost tumbled down, saying, “No more...mana...”

“Careful!” screamed Nanaki.

He grabbed Lunoa's collar, pulled her out of the way, and stepped forward. He'd also picked up a stick—one of the pieces of firewood piled up in a corner of the room.

"Don't underestimate orphans!" Nanaki dodged the man's attack while closing the distance that separated them. Once he was close enough, he started beating him with the piece of wood.

"Damn brat!!!" the last man roared, grabbing the candlestick from the ground and raising it high above his head.

Before he could hit Nanaki with it, Lunoa tore off the large fabric hanging from the wall. She quickly wrapped a piece of debris from the stone altar in it.

Mireille had taught her how to make an impromptu melee weapon in case of an emergency. She never thought the day she'd need to use that lesson would come so quickly, but she calmly aimed and swung it at the man's chin. The weight of the stone added to the centrifugal force smashed the man's chin into dust despite Lunoa's weak arm strength.

The man fell to the ground. Nanaki and Lunoa hit him again and again until they were entirely sure he'd lost consciousness. Only then did they finally allow themselves to take in a deep breath.

"Hah... Hah... Did we...hah...win?"

"Y-Yes... We did..."

As Lunoa did her best to steady her breathing, she turned to look behind. Alice's wall was nearing its limits and had started vanishing. Beyond the remaining water, the blonde little girl was breathing hard. Another girl had stepped in to help her stand upright.

"Good grief. I thought things were noisy and here's what I find."

Lunoa's relief only lasted for a moment as she and the others immediately turned to look at the person who'd just spoken. There stood the priest who had left the hall a few minutes prior.

When Lunoa and Nanaki faced the man, he blocked their path toward the corridor where Alice and the others were. But Lunoa had run out of mana, and Nanaki was almost out of stamina.

“What should I do...?” she whispered.

“Damn...”

The priest let out a sigh, as though he was fed up. “Listen well, dirty brats. If you don’t want to die, go back to cell right this in—ARGH!”

Before he could finish his sentence, a blonde woman punched him in the face, cracking his skull.

“Oh my,” the woman said, surprised, “Lunoa and Alice? What are you two doing here? It’s late. Children should be in bed already!”

◆

Early that morning, after gobbling down a light breakfast, Tida leaped out of the inn’s restaurant and into the lobby.

“Well then, I’m off!” she exclaimed.

“Yes, yes. Be careful,” Ellie said.

“Because I’m so pretty I may just get attacked if I lower my guard, right? Don’t worry, I’ll be extra careful!”

“Oh, no, I’m not worried about that. I meant to caution you not to drink yourself into oblivion. Coming back wasted every day isn’t a good look.”

“I shall promise to make every effort to live up to your expectations...” Tida said, averting her eyes.

Tida started humming and happily skipped out of the inn. She walked down the main street and through the large gate that led into the city center—Kellevan’s famed entertainment district. Even in the early hours of the day, women in light clothing walked arm

in arm with men, and the smell of alcohol wafted from the passersby. Everything about this place screamed red-light district.

She happily turned a corner and entered a bar hidden away in a back alley with only a small sign advertising its existence. The bar's interior was dark and narrow. There were no tables, only five seats at the counter. The owner was busy polishing a glass, so he did not bother looking up at Tida.

"This isn't a place for brats, go home," the owner said.

"Come on, don't say that. Mr. Robb told me about this place."

"Robb? Are you his friend?"

After hearing the name of one of his regulars, the owner finally looked at Tida.

"We hit it off yesterday at a tavern on the main street. Once I cleaned Mr. Robb out of his money at poker, he begged me to let him off by introducing me to this place. I heard fun people gather here. Am I wrong?"

The owner shrugged and pointed at a seat.

"Sit down."

"And that's roughly how it went."

Tida hummed. "I can't believe he did that! Ah, I'll have that distilled spirit on the rock next!"

The sun was now high in the sky, and Tida drank cheerfully. After trying a glass of every bottle she'd set her sights on, she paid and left the bar.

"Heh heh heh, what a fun city."

She was feeling tipsy in the best of ways, staggering through the streets until the smell of alcohol and food drew her to another establishment like a moth to a flame. The cycle repeated as she

went from famous taverns to hidden gems she'd heard about from regulars and small bars that caught her eye. As the day progressed, so did her state of intoxication. After she wandered around, she ended up in a small alley with barely anyone.

"Huh? Did I get lost?"

Tida tilted her head in confusion, wondering where she was when a group of unsavory-looking men surrounded her.

"Do you guys have business with me?" she asked. "Ah! I know! You're trying to hit on me! You are, aren't you? But I'm sorry, I can't date you! I'm a fervent servant of God. I can't play around with men. Besides, I'm sorry to say that you guys aren't really my type."

"What d'ya just say?!"

Tida had successfully pissed off one of the men. He stepped forward, but another man—apparently their leader—held him back.

"Stop," he told his subordinate before turning to Tida. "You've been sneakily sniffing around asking about us, haven't you?"

"Me? I've done no such thing! Actually, I don't know what you mean."

"Don't play dumb. The informant you asked already came clean. Guess you were a little too stingy on the hush money."

"That's not quite right," remarked Tida. "Antipoison." As she spoke, she used a light-attribute spell to cleanse her body from the effects of the alcohol. "I did pay him. But not to keep quiet. I wanted to make sure he would reveal my interest in you. I didn't think you'd take the bait so quickly, though. Maybe that overpriced charge was worth it in the end."

"Wha—Urgh!"

Tida closed the distance that separated her from the leader in a single step and grabbed his arm, twisting it.

“Now is time for *you* to come clean. Tell me everything you know.”

“Damn! Kill her!”

At their leader’s orders, the men all rushed at Tida simultaneously.

She sighed. “As long as a few of you are still alive by the end, that will be more than enough.”

A few minutes later, the pungent smell of iron filled the back alley. The survivors trembled as they groveled in the blood of their comrades.

“S-Stop! Who the hell are you?”

“Hmm? You don’t know who I am, yet you attacked me like that?” mused Tida.

“We just did what we were told to do! They said to kill you so...”

“I see. How about you tell me who ‘they’ are then?”

“Please... Don’t make me! They’ll kill me if I speak!”

“Would you rather die now?”

“W-Wait! You can’t do this! If you kill us all so brazenly in the middle of the city, you won’t get away scot-free! We’ve got higher-ups of the Church of Ibris backing us up!”

“Oh, you don’t need to worry about me. Hmm... Let me see... Where did I put it again? I never wear it so I tend to forget. Ah! There it is!” Tida pulled something from her pocket and dangled it in front of the man. “You know what this is, right?”

“No way... I never heard that you—”

“You couldn’t have. I entered the city with a group of merchants. So, have you made up your mind?”

“L-Let me live...”

“I might consider it if you tell me what I want to hear. How about you start with the place you’ve been taking the children?”

◇

“How noisy. Something must be happening.”

“Indeed. It’s hard to tell where the noise is coming from since it echoes so much, but people are fighting.”

Hilde and I had entered the ruins that served as the kidnappers’ hideout and advanced carefully, concealing our presence. All the people we’d seen thus far were either clergymen with the sacred seal of the Church of Ibris hanging around their necks or rough-looking hoodlums. To be perfectly honest, the clergymen looked just as unsavory as the hoodlums.

“I know this pathway,” Hilde said.

“You’ve been here before?” I asked.

“As you know, I hold a rather high position in Kellevan. I’ve come to these ruins several times, and if memory serves me right, this corridor leads straight to the sanctuary.”

“The sanctuary?”

“While they call it that, these are ruins. It’s just a large, empty hall with statues of the ancient gods.”

“The ancient gods, huh? Come to think of it, the scriptures of the Church of Ibris said there used to be several gods watching over the world. Before leaving the heavens, they invited the saint of the Church of Ibris and bestowed their powers upon her so she could become the new God that’d protect the world in their stead, right?”

“Yes,” Hilde confirmed. “That’s why these ruins are sacred to the Church of Ibris.”

I followed Hilde to a large hall. As a place of worship, it must have been lavishly decorated in the days of old, but there were no traces of that anymore. The old stone walls were bare, and the statues of the ancient golds, while grandiose, threatened to crumble based on the cracks I could see here and there.

“It is...empty, indeed,” I said.

“I warned you,” replied Hilde. “Still, this hall stands at the center of the ruins.”

“Which means Alice and the others must be somewhere, at the end of these corri—”

A thunderous roar interrupted me, and the entire hall shook.

“What’s going on?!”

“The tremor came from under?!”

“First the noises and now this... Something strange must be happening within these ruins,” Hilde said.

“Alice and Lunoa might be involved in the commotion. Let us look for a way down.”

“I did not want to use it, but I suppose I have no choice...”

Mana surged around Hilde, then condensed it into her right hand and took the form of a smoking pipe with delicate silver butterfly ornaments.

“Divine Artifact, Petalouda.” Hilde brought the smoking pipe to her lips and inhaled before slowly letting out white smoke.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“My Divine Artifact, Petalouda, the ephemeral butterfly, allows me to turn mana into smoke. It uses considerable amounts of mana and is quite flamboyant, so I’m not too fond of using it.”

The white smoke didn’t disperse. Instead, it formed a small white cloud that floated in the air. Hilde pointed her smoking pipe at the cloud, and it started spinning before spreading across the hall like fog.

“With such a small concentration, I can’t do much, but it’ll be enough to investigate our surroundings. I’ll look for the path usin—

Huh?”

“Hilde?”

“What is this...?”

Hilde gazed at the feet of a male god statue. She gathered her smoke there, and it somehow picked up a stone slab from the ground, revealing a stairway.

“There’s a hidden passage,” she said.

I approached and studied the stairway. “It’s used regularly.”

“This would be the perfect place to hide the kidnapped children. Let’s head down.”

I nodded, and the two of us went down the stairs. It led to another dimly lit corridor, so we advanced side by side. Hilde’s smoke was perfect for surveying our surroundings, and she quickly found a cleverly concealed pathway.

“This pathway wasn’t part of the original structure of these ruins,” continued Hilde. “The stones aren’t the same, and they’re definitely not as old.”

“This part must have been added later.”

We examined the pathway and saw light at the end, then hid in the darkness and approached until we reached a fairly well-lit, ample space. It was as large as the sanctuary above, although this hall had luxurious decorations. I felt like I had just walked into the church of a major city. While the pathway seemed to have been built far more recently than the rest of the ruins, this hall was old. I could only assume that someone had added the pathway to connect two parts of the ruins.

Several clergymen and a man in fine clothes were in the hall. The sound echoed in the large, underground hall, making it possible for Hilde and me to hear their conversation. An obese clergyman, who bore the crest of the Church of Ibris, let himself fall heavily onto a sumptuous chair and started screaming at the others.

“What’s going on?! What is all that noise?!”

“I-I’m terribly sorry. An intruder seems to have made it in...”

“What? Is it one of the holy knights?”

“No. It seems to be a feisty blonde woman.”

“Get rid of her, then. Fast!”

“Yes!”

A group of clergymen hurried out of the hall as the obese man glared at them. He then looked at the man in fine clothes.

“I’m very sorry about this, Count Choronzon.”

“It’s no problem, Archbishop Dondor. You must be tired.”

“Truly. Dealing with useless subordinates is tiresome, to say the least,” said Dondor, shrugging. “Speaking of which, to what do I owe the pleasure of your visit, Count Choronzon?”

“I hurt my right leg in a carriage accident. I was having difficulties when Marquess Triart told me about this place.”

“I see. Then let us move on to treatment right away, my lord.”

I frowned as I listened to the two men converse calmly.

“These two...”

“Do you know who they are?” Hilde whispered.

“They’re Dondor, the traveling archbishop of the Church of Ibris, and Chozonzon, a count of the Kingdom of Haldoria. Dondor is in charge of supervising the operations of the church on the Central Continent, but there have always been negative rumors about him. I’ll never forget the dirty way he looked at me whenever I saw him in the kingdom.”

“He’s a clergyman, isn’t he?”

“Well, yes. Since we’ve found him here, it’s certainly fair to say that he’s a piece of trash, just as the rumors said. As for Count Choronzon, he’s one of the noblemen who follows the crown prince around to line their pockets.”

Choronzon rolled up the hem of his right leg. Another clergyman ran to Dondor to give him a dark red crystal ball and picked it up before walking up to the altar.

“What is that crystal ball?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” responded Hilde. “But I assume he’s going to heal his leg.”

“It’s a fairly serious injury,” I said. “Most archbishops would struggle to fix it, even using High Heal. While Dondor is one, he only earned that position through political power plays. I doubt he has the skills to heal such an injury.”

The carriage wheel appeared to have dragged Choronzon’s leg across the ground, initially leaving it in a terrible state. Magic had clearly been used to force the bones back into place. Whoever had done so—the only healer in the vicinity, I assumed—had done a relatively poor job. Although that person had most likely saved his life, the haphazard fix made it challenging to return to normal. It was even more difficult than healing Lunoa after her own accident.

Dondor used the crystal ball as a catalyst and started chanting. However, I struggled to make out the words.

“Is that...the language of the Old Kingdom?” inquired Hilde.

“There are metaphors and proper nouns, so I cannot translate it all. Still, the gist of it is along the lines of: ‘I offer this sacrifice to restore this body to its rightful form.’”

“You understand the language of the Old Kingdom?”

“Only to some extent.”

“You say he mentioned a sacrifice. He must be referring to that catalyst.”

“It appears the crystal ball stored mana inside... Well, I suppose that doesn’t matter. Let’s capture them.”

“That’ll make our presence known.”

“We have no other choice. We looked for so long and couldn’t find Alice and Lunoa. These ruins are much larger and more intricate than we anticipated. Dondor must be among the higher-ranked people here and know where they are.”

“Are you sure? There’s a Haldorian noble with him.”

“I don’t mind.”

◇

From the start, I intended to get rid of Choronzon. He operated behind the scenes and often incited Friede to make bad decisions. Even though I’d only figured it out after making my escape, he’d also actively worked to bring Sylvia Lockit and the crown prince closer while plotting to remove me from the equation. I assumed he thought Friede would be easier to control with me out of the way. My absence allowed him to benefit. Yet he always pretended to be loyal in front of me, making him difficult to deal with.

“No,” I whispered, stopping myself as anger filled my chest. I suppressed it, knowing I couldn’t kill him yet. “I need to focus on saving Alice and Lunoa.”

Hilde and I walked boldly into the hall.

“Who goes there?!”

“The guardian of the children you abducted. If you don’t want to die, hand them over right this instant.”

As the clergymen around Dondor saw us approach, they raised their weapons hurriedly.

“Hilde Callard?! And...no way! Elizabeth Leiston?!”

“What?! Lady Elizabeth?! Were you in the empire all along?!”

“It’s been a while, Archbishop Dondor, Count Choronzon. I’d love to take the time to rekindle old friendships, but I’m in a hurry. Would you kindly point me in the direction of the abducted children?”

Dondor and Choronzon stared at me, aghast. Choronzon was the first to regain his countenance.

“I’m not sure I follow, Lady Elizabeth. What abducted children?” asked Choronzon. “His Majesty the King and the prime minister are beside themselves with worry about you. Please, come back with—”

The tip of my Ice Arrow grazed his cheek, and a drop of blood started rolling down.

“It’s most regrettable, but I am a wanted criminal in the kingdom. Besides, I doubt they’re worried. My father and the king are only looking for me because they miss their favorite tool,” I stated. “Anyhow, I’d like for you to answer my question now. Where are the children? I know they’re inside these ruins, so speak up.”

Choronzon had realized I was serious and started panicking. I noticed the cold sweat running down his face as he glanced at Dondor.

“I-I don’t know anything about any children! Believe me!” the count exclaimed. “I only came to get treated because Marquess Triart recommended this place to me but it’s my first time here!”

“I see. In that case, you are of no use to me.”

“ARGH!!!” he cried as one of my arrows pierced into his freshly healed right leg. “W-Wait! Don’t...NOOO!!!”

My arrows struck his right arm, left arm, and left leg in order. Ice started spreading, slowly freezing his four limbs and leaving him unable to move.

“No! Stop! Let me go!”

“I have much to ask you, but that shall have to wait. The

children's safety comes first. Be quiet and stay put for a while.

Choronzon couldn't withstand the cold and the pain, then lost consciousness. I ignored him and turned to Dondor.

"Now, Archbishop, I'm sure *you* know the answer to my question."

"Wh-What are you talking ab—"

Dondor didn't answer correctly. A blade of white smoke floated his way and the next moment, one of his thumbs fell to the ground.

He cried out in pain.

"It's time you stopped pretending. You dared to lay hands on my guests. You tarnished my honor as the Silver Butterfly. Do you have any idea what consequences await?" declared Hilde, furiously bringing her smoking pipe to her lips.

"Kill her! Kill them both!" Dondor screamed.

Clergymen ran at us from every corner of the hall, weapons in hand.

"There's no end to them," I said, groaning.

"I'll take care of them myself," Hilde stated.

"Are you sure?"

"I will not lose face any longer. They dared do as they pleased in Kellevan—in *my* city."

I shrugged and stepped back.

"Black Butterflies," Hilde chanted.

Hilde waved her pipe, and the white smoke turned into countless small butterflies. They flapped their wings and flew toward the clergymen.

A clergyman tried to destroy the butterfly approaching him with

his mace, but the creature was made of smoke. It immediately returned to its original shape and kept flying until it stopped on one of his comrades' forehead.

That clergyman had a sword in hand and immediately raised it to slice his own throat, a gurgling noise escaping from his lips.

As the butterflies reached more of the men, the spectacle grew more gruesome. The clergyman with a mace started violently striking one of his comrades in the face. At the same time, his target raised his spear and thrust it into his chest. Before long, the clergymen in the room had all committed suicide or murdered one another.

"What a grim spectacle."

Hilde let out a little laugh. "I can imbue spells into my Black Butterflies. For the record, I used Hypnosis. It doesn't always work if the target has good magic resistance, but it's quite effective on groups of small fries."

I frequently used my Grimoire of Beelzebub to cast Hypnosis, although anyone who braced themselves could easily counter that spell. These clergymen were ready to fight. Putting them under a state of hypnosis and forcing them to commit acts their psyche would resist, such as suicide or friendly fire, shouldn't have been possible. Hilde's abundant mana or stellar control couldn't explain this, so I assumed her Divine Artifact had something to do with it. While I wasn't sure how it worked, I supposed embuing spells directly into the smoke allowed her to focus the effects on a single entry point, making her attacks more effective. I could most likely withstand her Hypnosis with my mana, hoping she'd never become my enemy.

"Are you done?" she asked, twirling her smoking pipe in her hand.

Dondor glared at her, infuriated, and screamed, "M-Monster! They're all so useless! There was more than one intruder!"

"What do you mean?"

As Dondor grew increasingly agitated and started cursing, a man's body flew into the large hall from the end of the opposite corridor. It crashed into one of the walls, leaving a crimson stain on the stones.

Dondor yelled, "Wh-Who are you?!"

Although the intruder did not intend to answer Dondor's question, the timing of her entrance and introduction matched perfectly.

"Hi, hi! Here comes the prettiest sister around, Tida!"

"Tida?"

"Oh! Hey Miss Ellie, fancy seeing you here."

A blonde head peeked at us from behind Tida's back before running at me.

"Mama!"

"Alice!"

I took her in my arms and picked her up. She didn't appear to have any big injuries, and I sighed in relief.

"I'm so glad you're fine..."

"Miss Ellie," called out Lunoa, following behind Alice.

There was a red mark on her neck, but her injuries didn't appear to be severe. A little healing magic would fix that in a heartbeat.

"Lunoa, are you all right?" I asked, patting her head and checking for other injuries.

"Yes. We'd just escaped the cell they put us in when Miss Tida appeared to rescue us."

"I see. Thank you, Tida."

"Oh, it's no problem. If you want to thank me, buy me some

booze!”

“I’ll get you the finest bottle I can find,” I answered, laughing. I put Alice down and noticed that there were more children behind Tida.

“It looks like she saved the children,” Hilde said. “In that case, we just need to clean up around here and we’ll be all set.” She took a step toward Dondor.

He started screaming like a madman, “You can’t! I’m an archbishop! An archbishop of the Church of Ibris! We control a third of the world, and I’m the highest-ranked holy man on this continent! Don’t you dare think that insignificant insects like you can stand up to me!”

“Is that how you want to play it?” Tida’s voice was colder than I’d ever heard. “Let me solve that issue for you. You’re not an archbishop anymore. I hereby revoke your position. There you go. Now you’re just a believer... No, you’re nothing but an apostate since you so brazenly went against the word of God.”

“Nonsense! Who gave you the right to decide such—”

“I have that right,” she cut him off, pulling on the leather string around her neck. The sacred seal of the Church of Ibris slipped out of her clothes, revealing a seal only given to people with a high status within the church. Depending on one’s position, the design and material were different. Tida usually carried the basic amulet that proved she belonged to the clergy. But the fact that she had a sacred seal meant that she was no ordinary sister.

[image]

Dondor’s eyes widened upon seeing it. He wasn’t the only one who was shocked. Hilde and I also stared in disbelief at the seal swaying in front of Tida’s chest. Needless to say, I’d long figured out that she wasn’t an ordinary sister—she was far too strong for that. I expected her to belong to the Second Division of Holy Knights, which specialized in exterminating monsters, or to the Ninth Division, which hunted down apostates. But I was completely off

the mark.

“What’s wrong? Did you forget about me, Dondor? We saw each other three years ago at the Grand Sanctuary, right? That can’t be helped. After all, you probably stood in the back while I made my speech and couldn’t have seen me all that well.”

“Ah… N-No… I… Wh-Why? Why are you here?”

Dondor’s face turned pale, and he started shivering uncontrollably.

At first glance, Tida’s seal seemed made of regular silver, but its distinctive glow had to be holy silver. Only five people could possess such seals. I’d previously met two of them. Among the three remaining ones, two were famous enough that I’d seen their portrait. Tida was the last one.

“Wait! Please wait! This is all a terrible misunderstanding! I’m a devoted believer in God!” he shouted.

“Silence. Apostates have no right to speak of God.”

Tida approached Dondor slowly. Her cold demeanor was unlike her usual cheerful self, and I could feel her icy bloodlust swirling through the air.

Dondor squealed. “No! Please! Please listen to me, Your Eminence, Cardinal Tildania!”

“I’m not interested in what you have to say. You drew out children’s mana until they died and used that to cast forbidden spells for profit. I’ve ordered the Fourth Division of Holy Knights squad to hurry here. As such, you will submit to their questioning and receive judgment.”

As Dondor held the bloody base of the thumb Hilde had severed while he retreated, he collided with the motionless Choronzon. There was no way out.

“I…I can’t… I can’t die in such a place!”

Dondor took out a short sword and raised it. That short sword looked nothing like a weapon as it was heavily decorated and had a needlessly curved blade. It was incredibly impractical. Most likely, it had been intended as a decorative sword or for usage in some sort of ritual.

He suddenly turned around and plunged his blade into the Choronzon's heart. The powerless count let out a confused whimper before screaming, then flailing so wildly that my ice started cracking. With his limbs frozen, such erratic movements were beyond dangerous and his bones cracked while his flesh tore. Blood flowed freely, creating a pool on the ground.

I had no idea what Dondor was planning, so I retreated, keeping Lunoa and Alice behind me.

After struggling for a short while, Choronzon stopped moving, and his body started swelling. My ice cracked and fell to the ground as his body expanded further. Soon, he'd turned into a deformed lump of flesh over three meters tall. His grotesque body pulsed rhythmically, and a rotten smell mixed with that of a wild beast came from it. Was his heart still beating?

Unexpectedly, the lump of flesh tore open at its very center. Two large eyeballs, roughly the size of a person's head, peeked through and glared at their surroundings. Tida, who'd been acting cold and domineering this entire time, all but squealed.

"Wh-What's with that thing?!"

Eventually, the lump of flesh took its final form. The upper part of its body was close to that of a human. However, it had a disproportionally sizable right arm and six legs like an insect.

"Ha ha ha! Say your prayers! This monster was sealed by an ancient god— AAAAH?!"

Dondor was in the middle of a sentence when the monster that Choronzon had become grabbed him by the head with its grotesque right arm. Even though Dondor screamed, the monster did not care. It slowly pushed Dondor's head into its humongous mouth filled

with uneven, uncanny fangs. The shattering skull under those fangs echoed along with the man's strangled screams.

Once it finished eating Dondor, the monster let out a terrifying, high-pitched battlecry before directing its giant eyeballs at us.

"It's coming!"

The monster's huge right fist flew at us. I managed to create an Ice Wall to block it at the very last moment, but the monster started swelling again when it hit the ice and had a larger fist. Then it hit my Ice Wall again, shattering it into pieces. I poured mana into my existing one and used it to trap the deformed arm into place before unsheathing my sword and slashing at it violently.

"Divine Artifact, Harvest," Tida chanted.

She used her Divine Artifact, a gigantic white scythe, to swing at the monster's arm while I immobilized it. But the flesh we'd torn open with our attacks wriggled, and the wounds immediately closed. The monster's arm then moved at an impossible angle, shattering my ice as it struck again. Though the swelling had gone down, the arm was still thicker than my entire torso. As the monster swung it around, the air trembled. I crouched to dodge while Tida leaped back at the perfect time, steadying her balance in midair before landing on one arm.

"Divine Artifact, Grimoire of Beelzebub."

As soon as my grimoire materialized, Hilde rushed to stand beside me with her smoking pipe. Three Divine Artifact users were present, so there had to be a way for us to defeat that uncanny monster.

"Lunoa! Take Alice and join the rest of the children!" I ordered.

"Y-Yes!"

Lunoa took Alice, who hid behind my back, by the hand and led her away from the fighting. I stayed alert while the two moved, but the monster did not spare Lunoa and Alice a single glance. Its large eyes remained fixed on us.

“Tida, could you tell us how your Divine Artifact works?”

“My Divine Artifact, Harvest, absorbs the mana of my targets so I can strengthen or heal myself. As you can imagine, one-on-one fights aren’t exactly my strong suit. It’s much better suited to handling large groups of opponents.”

Just as Tida had pointed out, she couldn’t make the best of her Divine Artifact against a single opponent. The monster didn’t give us time to think. Its six legs moved in turn and advanced incredibly fast, swinging its left arm like a whip.

Hilde quickly used her white smoke to form a shield, blocking the monster’s arm. She then wrapped her smoke around its left arm, pinning it in place.

“GAAAAAH!!!” the monster screamed, hitting the smoke with its right arm to free itself. Its attacks went right through the smoke and yielded no results.

“Ha ha! Bonds of smoke cannot be severed by brute strength,” Hilde said.

“Thunder Bolt! Rock Lance! Heat Wave!”

I took advantage of the monster’s immobilization to cast several spells from my grimoire. None of them dealt much damage. Even the shallow wounds I’d inflicted closed up before long, with purple foam rising to fill up the holes.

“Intermediate-level spells aren’t working,” I said.

“Why not use high-level spells?” asked Tida.

“We’re underground,” I pointed out. “If you want us to die under the rubble, I’m happy to cast some.”

“I’ll pass...”

The monster enlarged its arm until it managed to break away from the smoke. Right then, Tida ran up to it from behind and brought her large scythe down.

Pointy thorns suddenly flew out of the monster's back, piercing through Tida's body. Her lifeless form, riddled with holes, started losing its shape and soon turned into white smoke. I was unsure the monster had any intellect. Yet it stared at Tida transforming into smoke—or rather at Hilde's smoke losing its shape—and stopped moving. Was it surprised?

"Take God's punishment!" screamed the real Tida, using that opening.

Tida sprinted so fast that she appeared to be gliding on the ground. She slashed at the monster horizontally and successfully severed two of its thick legs. A dense, viscous black liquid gushed out of the wounds, looking like oil and emitting a terrible stench.

"Gross!" Tida yelped. "What's that?! Blood?!"

"If you drink alcohol all day, your blood will turn like that too," I said.

"Eek! Don't say such scary things!"

The viscous black liquid wriggled like a slime and crawled toward Tida and me. I created an ice pillar to protect us, but the liquid simply went around it. It was about to reach us when Hilde's smoke grabbed us and pulled us back.

"Phew, you saved us here!"

"Thank you."

Hilde's Divine Artifact allowed her to adapt to a myriad of situations. While one could use it for attack and defense, its lack of destructive power made it unsuitable for this monster.

The monster opened its large mouth wide and let out an animalistic roar.

"What's going on?!"

"This surge of mana..."

“Something’s coming!”

The amount of mana flowing out of the monster’s body increased drastically. It gathered around the monter’s raised arms, which started swelling again. Without delay, it brought them down and struck the ground. A thunderous sound echoed in the ruins as cracks appeared throughout the hall. Fragments of stone started falling from the ceiling.

“Huh?!”

“This room is about to collapse!”

“Alice! Lunoa!” I screamed.

I made water gush forth and sent it toward Alice and Lunoa. They’d frozen because of the shock, and I caught them with water before the stones could hit them. Most of the children were beside them, so I took the chance to cover them in water too. Then, I did the same for myself. Before the ceiling could collapse on us, I forcefully opened up a hole leading to the surface. As I led everyone up, I pushed the earth and rocks out of the way, crushing the large boulders blocking our path. When we finally reached the surface, the moonlight and a squadron of armed men greeted us at the entrance of the ruins. The soldiers were illuminating the area with cressets and light magic.

“Holy knights? Ah. They must be the people Tida called,” I noted.

Once we were safely out, I got rid of my water.

The children all coughed, taking in deep breaths. Despite being shaken, they all seemed fine. While I checked on them, the ground opened up next to us, and Tida jumped out. Soon after, rubble shot out, and Hilde appeared wrapped in her smoke. Both held more children in their arms.

“Is everyone all right?!” Hilde asked.

“Somehow, yes,” I replied.

“I thought my time had come...” Tida let out.

I looked at the mountain of rubble cautiously, still feeling considerable mana coming from under it. Thus, assuming the monster hadn’t died in the collapse was safe. Just as I thought about that, the mountain of rubble burst open, with the monster crawling out. The two legs Tida had cut off had already grown back, and it didn’t seem hurt.

“Tida, your ability can only activate if you slash at your target’s body, correct?”

“No. I can activate it as long as I can cut through mana.”

That changed things. Tida’s Divine Artifact was truly powerful, although it depended on the circumstances.

The monster looked around before fixing its large eyeballs on Tida and me.

“Tida, cut this,” I ordered

“Huh?! But...”

“Quick! It’s coming!”

The humongous monster was coming our way, so we had no time to waste hesitating.

Tida cut my grimoire in half. Under normal circumstances, I should have been able to recover about half of the mana I’d used to materialize my Divine Artifact. With Tida’s scythe absorbing it, I could not do so.

Her eyebrows furrowed slightly. “Wow. That was a *lot* of mana.”

“Use it to buy me some time,” I instructed.

“You got it!”

And so Tida threw her scythe over her shoulder, leaping toward the unsightly monster. She’d gotten a lot faster than before and was

right in front of it in the blink of an eye. The monster's grotesque right arm and Tida's scythe collided. Thanks to my mana, Tida's scythe had become far more powerful and easily sliced through the gigantic fist. She didn't let up and cut through the monster's entire arm, up to its shoulder.

She then ducked and slashed at the monster horizontally, cutting off its six legs. It would surely regenerate itself before long, but it wouldn't be able to move immediately. While Tida bought me time, I got ready to cast one of the most powerful spells in my arsenal.

Hilde and Tida sensed my magic and understood what I was planning to do. They moved in to support me and distract the monster while I chanted. As the monster fought Tida and Hilde, both of its large eyes were on me.

"Huh?"

When our eyes met, I felt peculiar mana flow through me, and my consciousness faded.

"...dy."

A chill ran through my spine, and I slowly regained consciousness..

"...lady."

I could hear a faint voice. I felt someone shake me gently.

"My lady."

"Nngh..." I groaned, finally opening my eyes.

A black-haired woman in a maid dress was shaking me awake.

"Mireille?"

"Hello, my lady. The wind is getting cold. If you'd like to rest, please return to your room."

My lady? Mireille didn't call me that anymore.

I noticed a beautiful, well-tended garden and a large mansion. I wouldn't mistake this place for anywhere else: it was the Leiston residence in the capital of the Kingdom of Haldoria.

"Why...?" I let out, struggling to understand what was happening.

"Is something wrong?" another voice suddenly said from behind.

I immediately recognized it and turned to glare at the man who'd just spoken.

"Friede."

"Whoa, wait a minute! Why are you glaring at me like that? Did something happen, Mireille?"

"Please do not let it get to you, Your Highness. Her ladyship is still half asleep."

Friede smile. “Ha ha! Even you have moments like this, huh?”

I felt anger surge inside my chest. Did he not remember what he’d done to me? Friede had dared... He’d dared... Wait. What did he do again? I couldn’t seem to remember.

“Why... Why did you come here?” I asked.

“Why? Well, I finished my work earlier than planned, so I came to visit my lovely fiancée.”

His fiancée? Yes, that’s me, I thought before speaking up. “Right... I’m sorry for my earlier reaction. I’m not feeling very well.”

“Did you catch a cold? You must be tired with your princess lessons. You should rest today. Come, I’ll escort you to your room.”

“Thank you.”

Friede extended his hand to me, and I took it. He was leading me toward the mansion when someone approached.

“Oh. I didn’t know you were here, Your Highness.”

“Hello, Sieg. I came to see Elizabeth.”

“Father,” I greeted.

My father frowned at the sight of Friede holding my hand. “Your Highness, it is not advisable to be overly familiar before marriage.”

“You’re being excessive,” replied Friede, sighing. “I’m just escorting her.”

Yet my father’s expression darkened. Before he could say anything else, someone hit his head with a folding fan.

“Dear! It’s high time you learned to let go of your daughter a little! I’m sorry for my husband’s rudeness, Your Highness.”

“It’s quite all right, Lady Leiston.”

The woman who’d just spoken had beautiful blonde hair and

eyes the same color as mine. I'd seen her in paintings so many times.

"M-Mother?"

"Yes, Elizabeth?"

"No... It's nothing.

She giggled, then affectionately said, "Silly girl."

I saw my mother every day, but I couldn't help but feel like something was out of place.

Friede continued to escort me to the mansion, and as we walked, I watched the backs of my parents as they strode in front of us.

"But Samantha! I can't let that youngster steal away my dear Elizabeth," my father angrily muttered.

"Be quiet, dear," my mother answered.

"It's perfectly natural for parents to worry for their children!"

"I shall hear you out when you show the same concern for that poor child you bury in work."

"But..."

While my parents argued, Friede told me about his work of the day.

"—and so the relief plan you proposed was approved during today's assembly. In the near future, we'll be able to provide meals through food drives, free medical care, and free work training for the poor. We'll also help them find employment."

"That's wonderful news."

"We've also been debating tax reform. I'd love to get your input on the matter. The current tax system has everyone paying an equal amount, but that means the wealth disparities only ever grow."

“I agree. The best we can do with the current system is offer tax exemptions,” I replied.

“Can’t the two of you discuss merrier topics?”

At my father’s grumpy words, all of us erupted in laughter.

I was at a marquess’s residence to attend a party as Friede’s partner. Everyone had finished exchanging greetings and had moved on to having small talk when a lady called out to me.

“It’s nice to see you, Lady Elizabeth.”

“Likewise, Lady Roselia…”

“Is something the matter?”

“No…”

I didn’t know what was wrong with me. These past few days, I often felt as though something was off. I was casually chatting with Roselia when someone else approached.

“Lady Elizabeth, Lady Roselia!”

I turned around and saw Friede’s knight, Robert, with a pink-haired lady at his arm. I immediately tensed up and put my guard up.

“L-Lady Elizabeth?”

“Lady Sylvia,” I said after a pause.

Why had I reacted like that? Sylvia Lockit was my friend. When I first met her, she didn’t know the first thing about etiquette and she now behaved like a proper noble lady.

“What’s wrong?” Roselia asked. “You’re acting weird today, Lady Elizabeth. Are you tired?”

“Oh my, are you all right?” inquired Sylvia with a worried

expression.

“I’m fine,” I said. “I’m just a little tired.”

“It’s almost time for your wedding, so you must have lots to do,” added Roselia.

Sylvia let out a soft laugh. “Even you get anxious!”

I quickly bid Roselia and Sylvia farewell and went to find Friede. The two of us left the party early.

The sky was so blue that it felt like the heavens were celebrating our union. Nobles from all over the kingdom and abroad had gathered at the church of the royal capital. I listened as the archbishop read the sacred scriptures and explained God’s love to us all, my face hidden by my veil. I wore a pristine white dress with golden embroidery, while Friede wore a tuxedo with silver embroidery and stood next to me. As I glanced his way, he took notice and smiled at me fondly. Everything was just as it should have been, but I couldn’t shake off the feeling that *something* was off.

I looked at the attendees. Among them were King Bulat, Princess Adel—who’d come back from the country where she was studying expecially for our wedding—my parents, Roselia, Sylvia, and Robert.

The proud king, my thoughtful friends, caring parents, and outstanding partner, whom I respected more than anyone else... Everyone I loved was here. My life was perfect, and a dazzling future awaited me. And yet...

The archbishop took out a sword traditionally used for royal weddings and was one of the treasures of the Kingdom of Haldoria. It was believed to have belonged to the very first king of Haldoria. Every member of the royal family had to devote their life to the prosperity of the realm before them. After the archbishop unsheathed it, Friede rested his palm on the blade and started reciting the oath. When he finished, it was my turn. I took a step

forward and reached for the sword.

“...ma!”

“Huh?”

I felt like I’d heard something.

“Elizabeth?” Friede whispered.

Right... The oath...

“...Mama!”

I gasped. The back of my head started aching terribly. An unease that hadn’t left my chest suddenly expanded as the face of a child passed through my mind—a beautiful girl with one red eye and one blue eye.

The young girl who always fell asleep on the sofa waiting for me.

The young girl who happily ran toward the lake, pulling me by the hand.

The young girl who laughed as she rested a crooked flower crown on my head.

Her name was...

“Alice.”

“What’s wrong, Elizabeth?” asked Friede with obvious concern on his face.

I remember now. Everything he did to me...

I snatched the sword from the archbishop and sliced Friede’s head off. Even as it fell to the ground, I noticed his expression hadn’t budged. He and the guests in attendance still looked at me with the same soft smile.

“Foolish... This is all so foolish!”

I imbued the sword with mana and slashed at the air. The world started distorting itself until the illusion wore off entirely, and I came back to my senses.

“Mama! Mama!”

A pair of odd-colored, tearful eyes greeted me when I woke up.

“Alice!”

“Miss Ellie! Are you all right?!” Lunoa exclaimed.

She was right next to Alice. I looked around and spotted Tida and Hilde were still fighting the horrendous lump of flesh. Only a few seconds or minutes had passed, meaning I hadn’t been out for long.

“Thank you, Alice, Lunoa. I’m fine now, so don’t worry and get away from the battle.”

I needed to regroup with Hilde and Tida as fast as possible. But that thought distracted me, making me lose focus for a moment. A dark shadow stretched, and Alice screamed before I knew what was happening.

“Alice?!”

“Alice!”

A black tentacle grabbed and raised her above the monster’s head. Was it trying to take a hostage?! Tida and Hilde immediately stopped attacking and stepped back, likely scared to hurt Alice. However, I soon realized that I’d been off the mark. The monster wasn’t trying to use Alice as a shield. It opened its mouth wide just like when it had devoured Dondor. Alice cried and screamed as it brought her closer to its humongous mouth. Hilde and Tida rushed to stop the monster but were too slow. They’d never make it.

Alice was about to die.

I imagined it happening, and my field of vision turned red. The

tempest of emotions was almost like the one that had welled up inside me when I'd decided to betray my country in that underground cell. But I could tell something was different in its nature.

"Divine Artifact, Grimoire of Leviathan."

The grimoire I'd just materialized was one of my trump cards. Needless to say, its incredible power came at a price, but that thought hadn't even crossed my mind. As soon as it formed in my hand, I flipped through the pages of the green book. I found the page I sought and poured even more mana into my grimoire.

"Divine Artifact Restoration: Glazermierch."

My Grimoire of Leviathan vanished, and a large sword shrouded in thunder appeared in its stead. The Grimoire of Leviathan could record Divine Artifacts, allowing me to use them. Naturally, there were several conditions I needed to clear before I could copy someone's Divine Artifact, and activating this power carried risks.

The Divine Artifact I'd just called upon was that of King Bulat of Haldoria. As my body transformed into lightning, the sword I held flashed. This ability—Thunder Spiritification—made that musclehead king one of the best fighters on the continent. In my current condition, I probably wouldn't be able to maintain this state for more than a few seconds, but that was more than enough time.

"Give me back my daughter!"

I dashed to the monster in a straight line as if I were a thunderbolt and cut off the black tentacle, rescuing Alice.

"Huh?! Miss Ellie?!" exclaimed Tida, astonished.

"What in the world just happened?" Hilde asked.

The explanations would have to wait.

"I promise mama will get rid of the scary monster, so be brave for a few more moments, Alice, all right?"

I felt Alice nod in my arms as I swung my large sword downward.

“Disappear. Thor’s Hammer!”

[image]

A thunderous roar echoed as lightning flashed, dying our surroundings white. Tida and Hilde swiftly jumped out of my attack’s range, but the monster had no time to dodge. The lightning hammer that seemed to fall from the heavens hit it directly, burning it. It attempted to regenerate itself, but the fire consumed it faster than it could recover. Only soot remained when the thunder disappeared.

I ignored Hilde and Tida’s dumbfounded stares and let Glazermierch vanish.

“Miss Ellie, that Divine Artifact was...”

“I— Argh.”

I was about to explain everything when I fell to my knees, out of strength.

“Mama!”

“Miss Ellie! Are you okay?!” Tida screamed.

“I’m...fine. I’m just...out of mana...”

I couldn’t hold my body up any longer and collapsed. Before my consciousness faded, I watched Alice cling to me as Hilde and Tida ran toward us.

◇

“Yesterday was quite the ordeal,” I said.

I was sitting with Hilde in one of the rooms of her mansion, enjoying a cup of coffee Mireille had poured me. Hilde had been kind enough to invite us to her residence, so we’d vacated the inn.

“It sure was,” she agreed. “Considering the scope of the incident, I supposed it couldn’t be helped. Speaking of which, are you feeling better?”

“Much better. A good night of sleep was all I needed to replenish my mana. To be honest, I’m more worried about her,” I said, patting Alice’s head.

The little girl was sleeping with her head on my lap. Ever since seeing me collapse yesterday, she refused to let go of me, even for a moment.

“She loves you very much, doesn’t she?”

I laughed. “I must admit, it’s not a bad feeling.”

Hilde smiled back before taking a sip of coffee, saying, “I can hardly believe such a large criminal organization had taken root in this city without me noticing a thing.”

“I’m sure the aftermath will be difficult to deal with.”

“You have that right. Just thinking about it fills me with dread.”

“Speaking of which, did you figure out why that archbishop kidnapped children? If he was after their mana, he could have killed them on the spot and drained their mana.”

“We questioned some of the survivors, and it turns out that mana drained out forcefully can only be preserved in a crystal ball for a few hours before it starts dispersing. You also need to use mana that matches that of the person you wish to heal for optimal results.”

“I see. That explains why they kidnapped and imprisoned the children in those ruins.”

“We’ve already arranged to send the children who still have living relatives back to their families. Some of them were even abducted from abroad!”

Tida had found proof that Friede accepted bribes from Dondor in exchange for turning a blind eye to him crossing the border with

children. The scandal was sure to hurt the Church of Ibris's reputation, so I wasn't sure she'd publicly reveal it. Still, it would make waves in the Kingdom of Haldoria.

Hilde told me she intended to send the children who had nowhere to go to an orphanage she sponsored in another city and that a carriage would soon depart to take them there. Two of them, however, wouldn't go—I'd take them in. One was Nanaki, the young boy who'd fought to protect the others alongside Lunoa, and the other was Dorothy, a young girl with promising magic. Once I returned to the capital, I expected I'd be busy helping them settle in and think of what path to pursue on top of my usual work. I wanted to ensure I spent enough time with Alice, so I had to figure out a way to make it all work. Hilde would be just as busy hunting down the city officials who'd colluded with the clergymen and getting in touch with Marquess Cobatt, the lord of Kellevan. She wouldn't stop complaining about the all-nighters she'd need to pull off.

"Do you know what Her Eminence Tildania is doing?" mused Hilde. "I offered her a room, and she stayed the night, but I haven't seen her since this morning."

"As a cardinal, Tida has to command the holy knights who gathered in Kellevan to investigate. She went to the ruins that collapsed with them. Despite her seeming to hate the idea, the squadron leader came by to get her early this morning and dragged her away."

"She, too, is having a hard time, huh? What about the children?"

"Lunoa is staying by Misha's side. I healed her wounds, but she lost so much blood that she still needs to rest. Thanks to the doctor you called, we avoided the worst. Misha seems to be beating herself up for failing to protect Alice and Lunoa."

"My..."

"Misha is an excellent fighter for her age, but she's a waiting maid in training, not a bodyguard. I told her so, though all she said was that Alice and Lunoa wouldn't have been in danger if she had been stronger. She just won't listen to me."

“That’s how youngsters are.”

“I suppose that’s true. She’s yet to come of age, after all.”

“All youngsters have trouble reconciling their ideals with reality. Only time and communication will help with that,” Hilde declared.

“You sound quite convincing. Wisdom truly does come with age.”

“Hey! In human years, I’d only be in my twenties!” Hilde pouted.

I apologized before asking, “I’m terribly sorry for the inconvenience, but would you mind letting us stay for a few more days?”

“Of course not, it’s no trouble. Do you still have business in Kellevan?”

“No, but the last ability I used during yesterday’s battle comes at a cost. I won’t be able to use my mana for the next few days. That means no Divine Artifact but also no magic or skills.”

“Should you really be telling me that?”

I laughed and said, “Don’t tell anyone else, all right?”

Hilde shrugged.

◆

Friede downed a glass of expensive alcohol in one gulp before holding it out for Sylvia to fill up again.

“My prince, I think you might have had enough to drink already…”

“Quiet! Keep your mouth shut and pour me another glass! What do you all take me for?! I’m the crown prince! Roselia disrespects me every chance she gets, and my father claims to be king but lets the prime minister make every decision for him! How dare he bring back my vile half-sister and order me to become her puppet?! She

should have stayed in the South and found some noble to marry! I won't let this slide! Never!" he barked, spit flying from his lips.

Sylvia didn't want to make him any angrier, so she readily agreed.

"You're right! You've done so much for this kingdom while Princess Adel was abroad playing around. She could never replace you."

"The daughter of a foreign whore, no less!"

Friede's mother, the first queen of the Kingdom of Haldoria, had died of an epidemic when he was a child. Adel's mother, Gyokuryou, was Bulat's second wife. She was a relative of the Reki Empire's emperor and, as such, a noble woman of high birth. But Friede was convinced that all southerners were barbarians.

Friede knocked down pieces of furniture as he yelled, "Damn it! Damn it! Damn it! I won't let these bitches take over my country!"

Sylvia screamed.

A piece of glass had just grazed her hand, leaving behind a red cut. Friede looked at her quietly press on it with her other hand. He looked like he wanted to say something but ultimately left the room without saying anything.

Alone in the room, Sylvia whispered, "Things can't go on like this... I have to contact father and plan my escape."

Sylvia was no fool. She knew that Baron Lockit had no affection for her. He treated the children he'd had with his legal wife very differently than her, the daughter of his mistress. However, he thought that Sylvia was valuable. Once he learned that Friede was about to lose all semblance of power, he decided that selling her off to some rich man was better than letting her sink with him. That would be her ticket out.

"I have to return to our territory and get him to send me somewhere far, far away. To convince him, I'll—"

Someone knocked on the door, interrupting Sylvia's monologue. Before she could answer, the door opened, and one of the waiting maids of the castle entered. Sylvia would have reproved her rudeness if that maid had been a commoner, although most of the castle's waiting maids were of noble birth. Without Friede to back her up, Sylvia decided it wasn't wise to antagonize her.

"Excuse me, Lady Sylvia. I stepped in without waiting for your response because I had an urgent message to deliver."

The waiting maid bowed, handed Sylvia a letter, and left the room immediately as soon as her lady took it. Her behavior didn't sit well with Sylvia, but Friede's authority was at an all-time low, and she couldn't complain. She sighed and opened the letter.

"Huh?! Wh-What?!"

The more she read, the paler her complexion became and she let herself fall to the ground.

[image]

Adel and Roselia, who'd just become the latter's direct subordinate, sat in a hastily prepared office within the royal castle, dealing with mountains of documents. Having just taken over the crown prince's responsibilities, Adel had much to do. However, she first chose to tackle was the counterfeit money incident. Bulat and Sieg were too busy dealing with their own duties and the overboard monster raids to handle anything more.

Adel secured money by cutting off unnecessary expenses and having misbehaving nobles pay fines. Those who couldn't pay up and whose sins were too severe to forgive with a mere fine were judged separately. She stripped them of their titles and seized their territories, giving some to those who had to cede part or all of their land to the empire as part of the kingdom's reparation. Convincing these families hadn't been an easy task, but Adel had had no choice. She had to mend the relationship between the kingdom and the empire.

Consequently, the kingdom lost land and nobles. These facts

alone made it seem like the kingdom had grown weaker, but that wasn't true. Purging the dishonest noblemen who held the nation back and reducing the size of the country hadn't caused Haldoria significant harm. Besides, Adel had weakened the power of the nobles who sided with Friede and instill a sense of distrust towards her older brother among the nobles who'd remained neutral thus far.

"Your Highness Adel!" exclaimed Marquess Lampton, throwing the door open and rushing into the room. He slammed his hands on Adel's desk. "What do you think you're doing?!"

"What do *you* think you're doing? Do you not know it's impolite to enter a room without being invited, *former* minister of finance?" asked Adel.

"I knew it! You were the one who plotted to strip me of my position!"

"Oh, please stop. You know full well you lost your position because of what your son did."

"I cut ties with that fool! He's no son of mine anymore! And I paid more than enough as compensation!"

"I'm afraid that won't cut it. Have you had the chance to see the plethora of evidence the empire sent? You knew what your son was doing but did not speak up. That is a crime. We've only taken your position and fortune thus far, but you should put your affairs in order. It won't be long before you lose your title...and find yourself in prison."

"Your Highness, please reconsider! I've served this kingdom as minister of finance for years!"

"Thank you for your hard work," Adel said, "but this country doesn't need you anymore."

Adel would not listen to his pleas. The former minister of finance's face turned red, but he said nothing more and spun to leave. Before he could leave the room, Adel rubbed salt in the

wound.

“Just so you know, we have guards watching you at all times. Don’t even think of running.”

“If you’ll excuse me!” Lampton spat out after a brief pause.

Adel did not spare him another glance as he stomped out, instead reaching out for the next document on the pile.

“Roselia, this report is inadequate. Have it sent back to the military department.”

“Understood,” said Roselia, then hesitated momentarily. “Are you sure this is for the best, Your Highness?”

“Sorry? Why, of course. This report is the responsibility of the military department, you can ask them to fix it.”

“That’s not what I meant… As things stand, you’re just like Elizabeth. While I’ll only have to serve as an aide for a limited time, you’ll never be free of this. Your country betrayed you, Your Highness. The kingdom will use and discard you. Will it not?”

“Ah, so that’s what this was about.” Adel placed the document she’d just picked up on top of the pile and turned to look at Roselia. “The king and prime minister are indeed trying to make me Elizabeth’s replacement. But there is one major difference between Elizabeth and me that you seem to forget.”

“A major difference?”

“I have a right to inherit the throne.”

The meaning of Adel’s words dawned upon Roselia, and she gasped.

“Your Highness…”

Adel nodded. “I will take it for myself. I can’t let an idiot like my brother rule this kingdom. He and his burdensome legacy shall sink so I can rise.”

She had made up her mind to use her brother to cut off those she abhorred. Roselia felt as though she was looking at the future ruler of Haldoria. Adel had gifts she did not: bountiful love and consideration for her people and the ruthlessness to use any means necessary for the good of her country. Her charisma was so overwhelming that Roselia bowed without even meaning to do so.

“I now see your strong resolve,” Roselia said. “I shall do everything that’s in my power to make the future you speak of a reality.”

“I’ll be counting on you, Roselia.”

The tense, almost solemn atmosphere had just relaxed when Maoran entered her master’s office.

“Mistress Adel, Lady Roselia, I’ve just received this report...”

Adel frowned as she saw the report, while Roselia visibly turned pale.

“That’s quite the stunt you’ve pulled, Elizabeth,” Adel muttered.

“Elizabeth?! Do you mean to say that she’s behind this?!”

“I have no proof, but I hardly believe she wasn’t involved in some way.”

“No way...”

Although Roselia was shaken, she couldn’t take her eyes off the report.

“Roselia, Maoran, do not mention to anyone else that Elizabeth may have been involved.”

“Why not?” Roselia asked.

“Look,” said Adel, pointing at a line that mentioned the weapons used in the incident detailed in the report.

The United Beast Kingdom primarily used those weapons. It was

beyond strange that so many had ended up in the kingdom.

“Is the United Beast Kingdom...?!”

“Most definitely. I can’t tell if Elizabeth allied with them or is using them, but this could become a diplomatic issue if we play our cards wrong. I’m thinking of leaving this matter to Duke Leiston.”

◇

After I returned to the capital, I resumed my daily routine as I paid extra care to the feelings of Alice, Lunoa, and Misha. The first two had been kidnapped, while Misha had been heavily wounded; they’d gone through a lot. I also gave the two children I’d taken in, Nanaki and Dorothy, jobs that suited them. Nanaki had a knack for fighting, so I hired him as a guard. As for Dorothy, I made her the assistant of an alchemist so that she could develop her talent for magic. Once I had secured their positions, I finally had enough time to fulfill my promise to Alice. Right at that moment, Mireille came to find me.

“Miss Ellie, Barl sent his report.”

Mireille handed me a piece of paper, and I swiftly read through it.

Barl had met up with one of his subordinates in ruins on the outskirts of the city.

“Whoa. Things are getting tense,” Barl commented as he listened to his report.

“The information we fed them amped up their animosity, but the people here already disliked their lord because of the heavy taxes and forced labor he imposed on them.”

Barl was infiltrating the main city in Baron Lockit’s territory. Following the counterfeit money incident, Baron Dyne Lockit—the current head of House Lockit—had had to give up a significant portion of his land to the empire. Because of that, his territory now bordered imperial land. His daughter’s engagement with the crown

prince had allowed him to extend his influence and live in affluence.

Barl mulled over the information he'd gotten from Ellie in his mind while he listened to his subordinate brief him on the current situation.

"What about the weapons?" he asked.

"Everything's on track. We've been pretending to be traveling merchants and distributing them as widely as possible. We've also given some to brigands. The adventurers taking them down are bringing their weapons home as war trophies. We're close to reaching the necessary number in the territory already and will spread more once we get started by pretending to pillage the storehouses of dummy companies we set up."

"And how's the lord's military looking?"

"Nothing much to worry about on that front. This territory wasn't on the border with the empire before, and Baron Lockit never cared much about upholding public order. Traitre's guards are better armed *and* better trained."

"Great. Sounds like we'll be able to head home soon, then."

A few days later, Barl brought his subordinates to a tavern. He kicked the door opened and he and walked in with his men. Another group of men sat around a round, discussing their plans. These people were the resistance—the core members of the movement plotting an uprising against Baron Lockit.

"H-How did you know?! Argh!"

"N-No!"

"We need to esca— Urgh!"

The men tried to flee, but Barl and his surbodirnates slew them one by one.

“Shit! That cursed lord would rather slaughter us than talk?!”

“Damn it!”

Barl and his subordinates wore leather armor bearing the crest of House Lockit. In the resistance’s eyes, they were soldiers the lord had sent after uncovering their plot.

“Kill them all!” Barl shouted. “Baron Lockit was clear: not one of these treacherous rats should get away!”

He’d shouted Baron Lockit’s name loud and clear for everyone. While he had ordered his men to kill them all, he’d previously told them to let a few escape on purpose. After they slaughtered most, they retreated.

The recent rumors about an upcoming tax increase and the lord embezzling the territory’s money had already fanned the flames of anger among the population. But this bloody incident was the straw that broke the camel’s back. A large uprising was about to start.

Barl hid in a storehouse on the edge of the city. He saw a group of a dozen citizens rush past it, weapons in hand. As per his orders, his subordinates were starting fires across the city at this very moment.

“The missy really has a loose screw, huh?” he whispered to no one in particular, taking a puff of a cigarette.

One of his surbordinates answered anyway, “What do you mean?”

“She was always unstable because she grew up suppressing her feelings to prioritize her duties, even though she was used as a tool. When her anger blew up, she did a complete one-eighty and ended up that way.”

“She was always unstable?”

“Think about it. When the missy left the kingdom, she’d barely become an adult. Before then, that little lady spent her entire time

suppressing her emotions and devoting her life to her nation. She never even questioned why she was doing so! That's crazy, isn't it?"

"Well..." Barl's subordinate wasn't sure how to answer.

"The missy is soft on her people but ruthless with the kingdom's nobles. Don't you think that's pretty contradictory? She doesn't even hesitate to drag innocent citizens into her plots. A bunch of people died when she got rid of that little shit Robert, y'know? And the same thing will happen again now. Tons of people, from old men to little kids, will die. We need to get her revenge over with as soon as possible, or her heart won't be able to take it."

He had just finished speaking when the subordinates he'd sent into the heart of the city quietly entered the storehouse.

"Mr. Barl, the citizens have taken the guard's station."

"I guess their next stop will be the lord's residence."

"Yes. They've already encircled it."

"Perfect. Let's get going, then. We've gotta bring the missy the baron's head as a souvenir," joked Barl, throwing his cigarette down.

The rubbish on the floor caught fire, and smoke started rising, yet Barl didn't care.

"I'm not sure she'd appreciate us bringing her a head," one of his subordinates said.

"Guess we can bring her the contents of the baron's safe instead. She'll love that, won't she? The people will loot it if we don't, so I don't see the harm."

The scent of blood wafted in the air, and Barl could hear people scream in the distance. They set out toward the baron's residence, for the time had come. Barl's subordinates had turned the city into an ocean of flames. As the group walked, they saw people running frantically, trying to escape the flames, while others plundered or marched toward the baron's residence.

“Hurry!”

“W-Wait, father!”

A father came out of an alley, pulling his son behind him. A few seconds later, the mother came running after them.

“Hey! Don’t go this way, it’s dangerous! Run away!” the father warned Barl and his subordinate as he and his family ran toward them.

Barl sighed. “That’s one unpleasant job.”

“Huh?”

Barl pulled out a dagger and sliced the father’s throat.

“AAAAAAAH!!!”

“NOOOO!!!”

The mother and child wailed as blood spurted out of the father’s throat, and the man collapsed. Barl immediately slit the mother’s throat and, with the same motion, pierced the child’s back, plunging his blade straight into his heart. He pulled his dagger out and wiped the blood off.

“Kill all witnesses. No exceptions.”

“Yes, boss!”

As Barl and his men made their way toward the baron’s residence using back alleys, they slaughtered every last person who crossed their path. They had done their research and headed straight for the place with the least least security. They murdered the guards and entered the mansion, where security was a mess. The guards didn’t know how to deal with the bloodthirsty mob gathered around the mansion and were barely communicating anymore. It was a matter of time before they made it in. Barl and his men took advantage of the confusion to advance quietly, killing the domestics they ran into as they went.

“As planned, we’re splitting up. I’ll go kill the baron; you head to his treasure house. Make it look like the rioteers plundered it.”

“Got it!”

When Barl parted with his men, he headed straight for the center of the mansion. Every nobleman’s mansion was more or less the same, meaning the room where the head of the house would barricade himself wasn’t difficult to guess. Just as he’d expected, Barl found four armed guards in front of the largest, sturdiest-looking door. They seemed worried and were so busy whispering things to one another that they didn’t notice Barl approaching from the end of the corridor. They had obviously not received enough training.

Barl stepped in and cut off the head of the closest guard. The others watched in horror as their companion’s head bent at an unnatural angle before falling to the ground. Barl looked at them, exasperated. *You could at least get in position to fight*, he thought before crushing the skull of the next man with his bare fist. He finished off the last two with a powerful kick and a swift, piercing strike; he only needed five seconds to kill all four of them.

He shrugged at their weakness, then kicked the large door open. The wooden door collapsed with a loud noise and Barl walked in, quickly spotting a stout man cowering in the back. Four more men were in place, ready to defend him. Unlike the unprepared weaklings he’d faced in front of the door, they immediately raised their weapons. *Adventurers or mercenaries, huh?* mused Barl. The baron must have hired them when recently.

“O red flames, consume my enemy! Fire Ball!” a mage chanted.

Mana shrouded Barl’s body, and he simply kicked the Fire Ball to disperse it. A woman holding a spear had closed the distance, using the Fire Ball to conceal herself. Yet Barl dodged her attack with a slirght movement of the head before kicking up into her chin, crushing her skull.

“Madura!”

The sight of his friend's brutal death disrupted the magician's concentration. His mana flow was in disarray, and Barl threw a knife at him. A swordsman approached him simultaneously, but Barl threw the spearwoman's corpse at him. Barl took advatange of the swordsman's crumbling stance to grab the woman's spear and pierce through both bodies. He then stole the man's sword from his hands and slit the throat of the magician, who was writhing in pain on the ground due to the knife's impact. Finally, he turned to the last member of the party—a young healer whose legs had given out. She'd peed herself out of fear and was trembling when Barl decapitated her.

"They all lacked experience," he said, sighing. "They weren't bad, but they would have needed to train for another twenty year before having a shot at defeating me. Anyhow, it's your turn, baron."

Barl slowly walked up to Baron Lockit.

"W-Wait! M-Money! You want money, don't you? I'll give you as much as you want! S-Stop! Don't come any closer! I'm the future queen's father!"

But Barl cut off the wailing baron's left leg from the knee down.

The baron screamed in pain and continued begging for his life, "Stop! Please! It was all my fault! I won't force my people to work anymore! I'll lower the taxes too! So plea— ARGH!"

Barl thrust his knife into the baron's left thigh and stepped on it. He said, "I hate to break it to you but I'm not one of your people."

"What?!"

Baron Lockit's eyes widened in surprise as Barl went on, his voice emotionless, "I was just ordered to kill you, that's all."

"By whom?! Was it Baron Arsman?! Or that damned Viscount Slengan?! Or was it—"

"Elizabeth Leiston."

As Barl uttered the name of his master, Baron Lockit's face paled, and his teeth started chattering.

"N-No way... Lady Elizabeth..."

"You used your daugther to remove our dear missy from the equation, didn't you? She's not fond of your daughter running away before her plan is in motion, so she asked me to destroy your house."

"No! This is all a misunderstanding! I never ordered that dirty girl to seduce the prince! Please let me talk to Lady Elizabeth! I'll swear my loyalty to her! I promise I'll be useful to her so— Huh?"

Barl kicked the baron's head, making the man collapse. He put his foot on the baron's chest and started pressing.

"Shut it."

"Argh... Wait! Blargh!"

The baron's rib cage shattered. He struggle to break free as the shards of bone pierced through his organs, vomiting large quantities of blood before he stopped moving.

"Mr. Barl."

"Oh, are you guys done?"

"Yes. We took all the cash we could and trashed the place. There were a few domestics as well as the baron's wife and children, so we killed them while we were at it."

"Good job," Barl said. "Come on, we're out."

Before fleeing to the empire, Barl and his men set fire to the baron's mansion.

"That's all he reported," said Mireille.

"Perfect," I said. "What of the kingdom's reaction?"

“Just as you expected, many believe this was an attack by the Beast Kingdom disguised as an uprising.”

“The Beast Kingdom values martial prowess and honor above all else. It only became one of Haldoria’s vassal countries, but its people respect Bulat’s strength. They have not submitted to the kingdom, though. If the Beast Kingdom had plotted this attack, this would be fine. But groundless accusations of the sort will enrage them. I wonder, can their relationship with Haldoria ever be mended?” I mused ironically.

“I’ve also received word that Prime Minister Leiston will depart for the Beast Kingdom soon to investigate the matter.”

“He took the bait.”

I played with the small bottle in my hands, making the liquid inside slosh around. The perfume geared toward beastkins was finally complete. We’d also finished developing plenty of cosmetics for beastkins.

“Mireille. Let us go to the United Beast Kingdom.”

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A man walked into a small bar with only five seats in the center of Kellevan. Strangely enough, the chic atmosphere of the bar, lit up by antique lamps, matched the song of a popular idol group playing on the magic radio.

“Welcome,” the affable owner said without stopping to wipe down the glass in his hands.

“Good evening,” the man said, sitting. “I’ll have whatever you recommend.”

“Coming right up.”

The owner served him a glass of a popular alcoholic drink with a neutral taste—a safe choice. He then took out a frying pan and started

cooking a few appetizers to go with the alcohol.

"Has this bar been around long?"

"Quite. I'm the twelfth owner."

"Wow," the client replied. "Actually, I'm a journalist from the dukedom. Would you happen to know anything about the kidnapping incident that rocked Kellevan centuries ago?"

"A kidnapping incident?" The owner of the bar thought about it briefly. He seasoned his appetizers while replying, "Come to think of it, there was one such incident. It was when the dukedom was still a kingdom. If I recall, one of the most influential women in the city at the time, the Silver Butterfly, solved the case alongside the famous Silver Witch."

"That's the incident I'm talking about!" the journalist exclaimed. "I'm trying to write a story about it. Do you know anything interesting about it?"

"Something interesting, huh? Well...there isn't really any proof but I once heard that Tildania Nautilus was involved in resolving the matter."

"Oh! The Saint of Compassion of the Church of Ibris?"

"It's only a rumor. But according to what I heard, Tildania was having fun in the city, visiting casinos and taverns, when she stumbled upon the hideout of the kidnappers by chance."

"Wait a minute. We're talking about Tildania, the saint known for her irreproachable morals and integrity, right? What was she doing going to bars and ganbling dens?"

"As I said, this is nothing but a groundless rumor. But I've heard that she came to this very bar. Apparently, she was fond of this distilled liquor," he said, showing the journalist a bottle. "It does sound like a dubious story, though."

"Ha ha ha! You're a born businessman! I can't write any of that rubbish, but I'll have a glass of that."

"Sure thing."

The owner put ice into a glass before covering it with the amber liquor.

Conversation at the bar *The Hidden Nook* in Kellevan, Cobatt Marquisate, Yutear Empire between a journalist and the bar's twelfth owner, Michael Hoffman

Afterword

Nice to meet you, new readers. It's been a while, old readers. I'm Hagure Metabo.

Thank you very much for purchasing this third volume of *A Livid Lady's Guide to Getting Even: How I Crushed My Homeland with My Mighty Grimoires*.

The number of coronavirus cases has increased these past few weeks. Thankfully, I haven't been infected and only had mild side effects after the vaccine. Between that and the change of season, it's a time when many fall ill, so I hope you can all take care of your health.

Moving on to the main topic, Alice—Elizabeth's adoptive daughter—is a character I hadn't even imagined when I initially planned the web novel. I thought of her much later, right before I started writing, and didn't have a clear idea for her. I simply believed having a golden-haired child with odd-colored eyes would be nice. Before I knew it, she became a central element of the plot!

Other characters initially intended to make brief appearances took on important roles when I never expected they would. It's truly a mysterious phenomenon. I often hear authors talk about how characters live a life of their own. Is that what happened? I want to believe that this isn't just me failing to control my story.

Now, some words of thanks.

First of all, masami-sama. Thank you very much for the beautiful illustrations you drew! I always look forward to seeing them. This volume, I was especially impressed by Hilde and Barl's designs. I can't thank you enough for bringing my vague descriptions to life with such talent!

I'd also like to thank Oonoimo-sama for writing the manga version of *Livid Lady*. I read and enjoy every chapter, and I cannot help but be in awe at the strength of manga as a medium to tell stories.

Thanks to S-sama, my editor, for taking the time to give me detailed advice and accurate criticism even during the busy period at the end of the year.

I'm also grateful to everyone who's worked hard to publish this book. They've gone above and beyond to bring this manuscript to you, and I'm starting to think they might soon reach the clouds.

Last but not least, I'd like to thank you, my dear readers. I'm overjoyed to have been able to see you all again in this third volume. This is all thanks to you!

Thank you very much!